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Neither Victims Nor Executioners

Nonviolent Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement

By

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Medgar Evers, Vernon Dahmer, Herbert Lee, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, Jimmie Lee Jackson, Viola Liuzzo and all the others —December 5, 2013

The Young Dead Soldiers

The young dead soldiers do not speak.

Nevertheless they are heard in the still houses; who has not heard them?

They have a silence that speaks for them at night and when the clock counts.

They say: We were young. We have died. Remember us

They say: We have done what we could but until it is finished it is not done.

They say: We have given our lives but until it is finished no one can know what our lives gave.

They say: Our deaths are not ours; they are yours; they will mean what you make them.

They say: Whether our lives and our deaths were for peace and a new hope or for nothing we cannot say; it is you who must say this.

We say: We give you our deaths. Give them their meaning.

We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us.

Archibald MacLeish

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Neither Victims nor Executioners

Chapter 1: Question and Inspiration

In each of the summers of 1964 and 1965 I spent a month in Louisiana as a volunteer with the civil rights organization the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). I was assigned to work under a charismatic young African American, ten years my junior, who with his CORE team was attempting to register long disenfranchised black voters. The experience was transformative for me. Of course I had read about the harsh living conditions of most southern Negroes, and the daily humiliation and cruelty that so many of them were exposed to, but seeing these things up close had an enormous emotional impact. I was outraged, and indulged myself in adolescent revenge fantasies (I was thirty-six) which, I was astonished to learn, were not shared by any of my co-workers. There were plenty of guns in the black sections of the small towns where I lived, and it was clear they would have been — and sometimes were — used to defend a home or a family under attack, but never did I hear it suggested that violence be used to avenge an act of aggression by whites—no matter how depraved or vicious.

Most of the people I met in south central Louisiana were decent and brave, and their religion or philosophy constrained them from hating their enemies. There were exceptions of course: the occasional preacher with a sinecure to protect would tell us he didn't want to "mess with all that" — meaning the freedom struggle — and the occasional braggart who loudly proclaimed how harshly he would deal with any white man who tried to mess with him. (*Messing* and *mess* were popular words those summers.) What I never encountered was a movement worker carrying a weapon to the courthouse when we escorted potential voters

there. And although I wasn't asked to participate in a sit-in or boycott picket line, I knew that participants, both CORE organizers and the local people they recruited to their cause, were strictly forbidden to carry weapons, no matter how many they might have at home, to any direct action protest, or courthouse visit, and I believe they never did.

I later discovered that this had been true of the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides and was true of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) demonstrations in Mississippi and elsewhere and in Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) marches and demonstrations in Alabama, Georgia and Florida. At the time I wondered at this, because such strict and universal discipline seemed counter-intuitive to me, but it was not until forty years later, when I returned to the civil rights movement as a student, that I determined to investigate why preemptive or retaliatory violence as a byproduct of the freedom struggle was and has remained virtually unknown. In the course of extensive research largely in the library, reading history, biography, memoirs, sociology but importantly including more than forty interviews with people ranging from movement leaders to the United States Attorney General at the time — and even a former Klansman, I found no examples of such violence.

I posed my conundrum of why this was so to a professorial polymath friend, now sadly gone, someone equally at home in the disciplines of history, political science, literature and philosophy. His response was rapid and unequivocal. "I don't think it's such a puzzle," he wrote, "that blacks and whites in the civil rights movement avoided violence. After all they were a small minority of the population, and blacks did not have the support of other ethnic minorities...Those who lived under conditions of oppression — Jews in Nazi Germany, Poles,

Czechs in Stalin's Russia, knew that turning to violence would be suicidal. Why expect African Americans to do so?"¹ Of course there is truth in this framing of the issue but only a partial truth. At least three possible levels of violence come to mind: First, the all out war scenario wherein hypothetically well organized and led blacks would attack a white occupied area or strong point. In this scenario my friend's analysis is clearly accurate. Second, there was the actuality of amorphous, unstructured violence—the dozens of urban riots of the 1960s and 70s. Unlike direct actions in the civil rights movement, these had no clearly defined goals but were primarily an expression of rage and frustration directed principally at the justice system, which was seen for blacks to be little more than a vehicle for unpunished police brutality, and acquittals of guilty white assassins.² The riots accomplished nothing for the black participants, except perhaps for an emotional release, and sometimes attacks on property owned by whites and Asians got out of hand and destroyed property owned by members of the black community, thereby making the picture even bleaker for involved ghetto residents.³ In any event, these riots had no connection to the civil rights movement and are not the subject of my thesis. Third, and

1 John Patrick Diggins, e-mail message to the author, February 6, 2008

2 How differently the history of the 1960s might have played out if the police had acted in a professional and even handed manner all over the country is indicated by the outcome of an incident in the District of Columbia in 1950. The summer before the public pools had been closed because of racial disturbances—whites attacking blacks who wanted to swim there. The next summer the Secretary of the Interior was the southern born Oscar Chapman. He ordered that National Capitol Parks Police, pool personnel and government officials be trained in handling racial tensions. The Interior Department "publicized its decision to open the pools to everyone and emphasized the fact that the law would be enforced and that the policy of non-segregation was going to 'stick'" Result: "there was no disorder throughout the summer nor was it found necessary to station a large force of police at the pools to prevent an outbreak." For a slightly expanded account see Allen Grimshaw Ed., *Racial Violence in the United States* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969), 324-5 and n. 11.

most important, I would posit the possibility of a kind of focused guerilla warfare that targeted whites who were known to have killed or beaten black men, women, or children. It is this type of violence that I have investigated, and found that though it was discussed in the South of the 1950s and 1960s it was, as far as I have been able to determine, never implemented. That seemed particularly puzzling, since virtually every analysis of aggressive violence emphasizes either an inescapable biological imperative (Freud's *Todestrieb*) or a reaction to frustration, as its principal explanation. African Americans were subject to biology like everybody else and as a group suffered endless frustration. To these spurs to aggression can be added in the case of black males what Orlando Patterson called "the relentless effort [by white oppressors] to emasculate the African-American male in every conceivable way and at every turn."⁴ Since the German historian Simon Wendt has called black armed self-defense "the gendered symbol of male psychological empowerment,"⁵ my question again is why violence in the movement was limited to self defense, particularly when the provocation seemed endless and endlessly vicious. A few examples will suffice. In the summer of 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from

3 August Meier and Elliott Rudwick write that these could be described as "new riots" and note that "the riot pattern since the summer of 1964...has involved Negro aggression mainly against white owned property, not white people." Hugh Davis Graham and Ted Robert Gurr, Eds., *Violence in America* (New York: Signet Books, 1969), 386.

4 Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequences of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1998), xiii.

5 Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2007), 26.

Chicago who was visiting relatives in Mississippi, was kidnapped and killed. The two murderers freely admitted their guilt, yet were acquitted by an all white jury. They told a national publication that their motive was that Till had whistled at a white woman. The boy's mother left the coffin open at his funeral so the world could see the brutality of the crime: his eye had been gouged out, his body badly beaten, then he had been shot and dumped in a river. The self-confessed killers died in their beds many years later.⁶ There was revenge, but it was hardly proportionate. A few months later Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus with cataclysmic consequences—from that single act of defiance the Civil Rights Movement as a mass movement was born, and yet no violence. Ms. Parks often said she was thinking of Emmett Till that day. This essay will attempt an explanation.

6 Jim Kates, author, teacher and SNCC field worker, offered me an unusual explanation for the lack of attempts at revenge in a setting like Money, Mississippi. He says that after he left Mississippi he came to understand that in the small communities there was a web of relationships involving even the most militant blacks and racist whites. They might have helped one another in an emergency and then gone back to vicious hostility when the emergency ended—but the bond, however fragile, was there—weak perhaps but strong enough to prevent retaliatory violence. No one else I spoke with endorsed this theory. Interview with author, October 7th, 2007.

Chapter 2: Hypothesis

Since the question I have posed in this thesis concerns the civil rights era, it is important to define the time period under consideration. Because the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott was the first mass action of that struggle, I date the inception of the modern civil rights movement to Montgomery in 1955⁷; and by virtue of the fact that by 1968 CORE, SNCC and the SCLC had become pale, transmogrified reflections of the powerful forces for justice they had once been, I take that year to mark an end point.⁸ Since the histories of slavery, Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era prior to 1955 shaped many of the attitudes about which I write, accordingly, I have thought it important to furnish background and context by discussing historical events outside the temporal borders of the civil rights movement.

Within the civil rights movement time frame, southern blacks surely had the motive and the cue for passion that might have led them to seek revenge. But they did not do so. Why was there such an absence of violence, despite clear provocation and ample opportunity?

An example of almost incomprehensible forbearance came in June of 1963. Medgar Evers, state chairman of the NAACP in Mississippi was shot in the back by a man named Byron de la Beckwith. There was no question of the man's guilt—he boasted of it. He was tried for the

7 Charles M. Payne reminds us that “the normative interpretation of the movement’s origins is likely to stress the general liberalization of postwar America” and notes many “warnings against starting the analysis with Montgomery or *Brown*.” Payne correctly, I believe, rejects this analysis and “wonders what Amzie Moore or Medgar Evers [NAACP activists] would have said in 1957 or 1958 had someone told him the country was getting more liberal.” *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 421.

8 They were not the only casualties of the reaction that set in at that time. A whole unifying constellation of causes that had once been known simply as “The Movement”—including civil rights, peace in Vietnam and women’s liberation began to fall apart. Michael Ferber and Staughton Lynd wrote that after 1968 “The Movement” should be understood as “referring to a set of movements, some overlapping, some mutually exclusive, many hostile to one another.” Michael Ferber and Staughton Lynd, *The Resistance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), ix.

crime twice and both times the outcome of the trials was a hung jury. There is a bitter irony in the fact that the *Saturday Evening Post* considered the fact that there were even a few votes for conviction a great stride forward in human relations, and there were celebrations in the black community. De la Beckwith lived peacefully in his community for thirty years after the district attorney decided not to try him a third time. Justice delayed is surely justice denied, but there is some satisfaction in knowing that in 1994 De la Beckwith was retried in a different racial climate, was convicted, and sentenced to life in prison where he died.⁹

The most terrible of all the crimes committed in that era took place in Birmingham, Alabama when in September of 1963 the bombing of a black church took the lives of four little girls who had been attending Sunday school. Once again the identity of the perpetrators was known. The man who according to trial testimony was the chief conspirator, lived in freedom for fifteen years before being convicted and sentenced to life in prison where he died. The surviving co-conspirators went free until 2000 when they were all convicted and sentenced to life. They have suffered no violence, even in desegregated prison.

Why then, when thousands of civil rights movement workers and the local people they had recruited to their cause, proved willing to die for their belief in racial justice, was not one of them ready to risk incarceration or death to express his or her rage and frustration through an act of revenge?

There is no simple, single paradigm. From the multiple sources studied, I have been able to identify three strands that taken together may serve to interpret and elucidate the nonviolent behavior of the people who were involved in the civil rights movement.

First I will identify as a prime cause of the failure to resist the persisting psychological fetters of slavery and the oppressive life conditions imposed on blacks after emancipation. Many African Americans internalized the contempt with which they were treated. I describe this as the *Gramsci effect*. Others, remembering the brutality inflicted on their forbears, and

9 Taylor Branch, *Pillar of Fire* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 231.

observing how they and their families were treated by the white world around them, experienced a well grounded fear that to act could very well lead to permanent exile from their home – or an early death at the hands of the Klan. A third group of African Americans smothered their resentment, and were so depressed and downtrodden that they felt a passive resignation was their only viable option. These elements I have bundled under the rubric of apathy, and they affected many more people in the deep South than the positive factors which motivated the conscious agents of change who devoted years of their lives to the movement – and the indigenous people they successfully recruited.

The most critical of these other factors was the deeply felt and brilliantly conceived strategy of nonviolent resistance that was rooted in a faith-based commitment to Christian love and that love's concomitant abhorrence of violence – and this I have identified as the second strand.

Third, a strategy of nonviolence was adopted by many who did not embrace its philosophical and religious roots, but recognized that retaliation in a situation where the opponent had the overwhelming advantage in troops and guns could have no positive outcome. They also understood that a descent to the tactical level of the Klan would alienate liberal whites whose support financially and politically was crucial to success. Those in this group who wished to participate in a movement, not just as individual resisters – and they were a large majority – accepted the logic that for the sake of coherence, all participants had to accept the discipline that came with being part of an organized cohort. For some there was perhaps an element of cynicism in adhering to a doctrine they didn't really believe in, but cynical or not, no one in this third strand broke discipline – any more than the others did.

None of these strands alone is sufficient to explain why oppressive, abusive and violent behavior by whites did not elicit a like response from their black victims. Taken together the strands form a strong web which makes the forbearance of the activists and the people they worked among more comprehensible.

Chapter 3: Background

From the first arrival of Africans, brought here against their will in 1619, through the horrors of slavery, the terrors of the era of lynching and Jim Crow, and through ongoing hurtful actions by the white majority, the life of black people in America has in general not justified the optimistic scenario envisioned by the Declaration of Independence and The United States Constitution (which from the beginning made a distinction between “free” men and “all others”). Continuing a tradition from colonial times during slavery, white violence against blacks was never punished by the courts. “To ensure the slave’s complete submission to the master, the law imposed no liability on owners who killed slaves in the course of administering discipline.”¹⁰ Eric Foner writes: “Considering the extent of white violence against blacks, it is remarkable in how few instances blacks attacked whites”¹¹ Remarkable indeed!

Throughout these years of American slavery, bondsmen were sometimes quiescent, sometimes rebellious, depending on time place and circumstance. One of many examples of violent resistance: In 1800 the Virginia born slave Gabriel Prosser organized a plot which, had it succeeded, would have found Richmond in the hands of a well-armed black army. It did not succeed because one slave, whose loyalty to his master (or perhaps his hope for gain) outweighed his desire for freedom, betrayed it in time for it to be suppressed before it began.

10 Michael J. Klarman, *Unfinished Business* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

11 Eric Foner, *Reconstruction, America’s Unfinished Revolution: 1863-1877* (New York: History Book Club, 2005), 120-1.

White planters, searching about for instigators, the “outside agitators” of whom we heard so much in the 1950s and 60s, settled on some from their own midst, and “painted graphic pictures of noisy Jacobins over their wine, and eager dusky listeners behind their chairs.”¹² Quoted from a contemporary Federalist newspaper: “While the fiery Hotspurs vociferate their French babble of the natural equality of man, the insulted negro will be constantly stimulated to cast away his cords, and to sharpen his pike.”¹³ In 1831, Virginians were outraged and terrified by the bloody rebellion of Nat Turner and his followers. Their rationalization of this event also involved conspiracy theories, this time rooted in the influence of William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, “although there is not the slightest evidence that even one copy of it had reached any southern Negro.”¹⁴

The search for external sources of discontent by whites was of course an attempt to exonerate the oppressors from the accusation that their ugly behavior had sparked the revolt. Eugene Genovese writes that: “Almost every slaveholder claimed to trust his own slaves but to fear his neighbor’s.”¹⁵

12 Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Black Rebellion* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 83.

13 Ibid, 96.

14 Samuel E. Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 508.

15 Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 595. Obviously there is an exact parallel to the cant of civil rights era southern politicians who claimed that “our nigras” were happy

The *Amistad* uprising is the last instance of organized black on white violence except in self-defense I can find. Thereafter there was mostly rhetoric. After *Amistad* there was the noteworthy speech of Henry Highland Garnet to the National Negro Convention in 1843. Garnet was a fugitive slave who promulgated a resolution that “called on slaves to revolt and murder their masters.” Frederick Douglass himself engineered the resolution’s defeat—by just one vote.¹⁶ Following a path to militancy later trod by many movement activists more than a century later, Douglass came to believe, in 1852, that slavery could not be ended by persuasion and nonviolent action. Lomax recounts a conversation between Douglass and Sojourner Truth who had been dispatched by white abolitionists to bring Douglass back to the establishment line:

Sojourner Truth: “Fred—is God dead?”

Douglass: “No, God is not dead. And that is why slavery must end in bloodshed.”¹⁷

A few years earlier, a convention of fugitive slaves had issued a “Letter to the American Slaves” which urged them to “plunder, burn and kill as you may have occasion to do to promote and contented until communist troublemakers stirred them up. Incredibly, as recently as 1939 a proposal was introduced in the House of Representatives to erect a statue “that would both honor and express ‘the humility and meekness’ of the ‘old negro mammy.’” Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind, Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 196.

16 *Encyclopedia Britannica*: Garnet entry.

17 Louis Lomax, *The Negro Revolt* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 311.

your escape...If the American revolutionists had excuse for shedding but one drop of blood, then have the American slaves excuse for making blood to flow 'even to the horse bridles.'"¹⁸

But these appeals for violent action were almost certainly never heard by the people to whom they were directed. Perhaps the rhetorical excesses of Garnet and the authors of the "Letter to the American Slaves" are best explained by the findings of Professor Randall Collins, who writes of "the higher degree of rhetorical ferociousness found in the rear combat areas and at home, compared to soldiers at the front. I would interpret this to mean that tension is inhibiting their conflict behavior so little, not because they are unaware of their human targets, but because they are not in a bodily face-to-face situation with them."¹⁹

In any event, the debate about the prevalence of resistance among American slaves has not been settled. Their alternation of mood and behavior has predictably created controversy in the rather constricted circle of historians and sociologists who have tried to decipher it. Obviously the caricature of black Sambo, a banjo playing, watermelon-eating bondsman who loves his master, is beyond grotesque, and yet serious modern historians have been capable of writing sentences like this as late as 1942: "The majority of slaves were adequately fed, well cared for and apparently happy...Topsy and Tom Sawyer's nigger Jim were nearer to the average childlike, improvident, humorous, prevaricating, and superstitious negro than the unctuous

18 Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1998), 301-2.

19 Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 77-78.

Uncle Tom...if we overlook the original sin of the slave trade, there was much to be said for slavery as a transitional status between barbarism and civilization.”²⁰ That such appalling ideas should have persisted in what passed for the mainstream as late as 1959 seems unlikely. Nevertheless, we find the Executive Director of the congressionally created Civil War Centennial Commission explaining that year: “We’re not emphasizing Emancipation. You see there’s a bigger theme—the beginning of a new America. There was an entire regiment of Negroes about to be formed to serve in the Confederate Army just before the war ended. The story of the devotion and loyalty of southern Negroes is one of the outstanding things of the Civil War. A lot of fine Negro people loved life as it was in the old South. There’s a wonderful story there—a story of great devotion that is inspiring to all people, black, white or yellow.”²¹ A not quite civilized, childlike, improvident and humorous chap who was also devoted and loyal to his white overseer was certainly not going to rise up against his master unless those outside agitators reappeared. One whole school of historians, writing mostly in the period before *Brown v. Board of Education*, espoused the view that slaves, while enduring some hardships, were certainly better off than their brothers in Africa, and for the most part were justifiably content with their lot and therefore not disposed to resist their condition of servitude. The most prominent writer in this group was Ulrich Phillips.²²

20 Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, Volume 1 Third Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 537-539.

21 Quoted in Dan Wakefield, “Civil War Centennial: Bull Run with Popcorn,” *Nation*, January 30, 1960, 97.

Another view entirely was put forth by the Marxist historian Herbert Aptheker who saw in the South a population of slaves seething with discontent and resisting in every way available to them, perhaps foremost simply running away but also including breaking or losing farm implements, starting arson fires, faking illness—and in more cases than other historians were willing to recognize, plotting and executing slave rebellions. He wrote in the half century anniversary edition of his highly controversial *American Negro Slave Revolts*: “Fifty years ago the controlling view held that the response of the slave in the United States to his bondage was one of passivity and docility...That opinion, so decisive a part of the chauvinism afflicting the nation, was shown to be false in this book. The material accumulated in the half century since its appearance has further substantiated its thesis, namely, that the African American people, in slavery, forged a record of discontent and of resistance comparable to that marking the history

22 More than a hundred years earlier, these ideas were in many ways prefigured in a brilliantly iconoclastic and wrongheaded defense of slavery written by a conservative Virginian social theorist named George Fitzhugh. In a mocking challenge to Northern abolitionists that must have justly hit more than one target he wrote: “Our slaves till the land...cook our food, brush our boots...do all hard work and fill all menial offices. Your freemen at the North do the same work and fill the same offices. The only difference is, we love our slaves, and we are ready to defend, assist and protect them; you hate and fear your white servants, and never fail, as a moral duty, to screw down their wages to the lowest, and to starve their families, if possible, as evidence of your thrift, economy and management—the only English and Yankee virtues.” Fitzhugh’s touching account of the love between master and slave finds something of a corrective in Frederick Law Olmsted’s account of his southern journey: “It appears to me evident... that the cash value of a slave for sale...is generally considered among the surest elements of a planter’s wealth...That a slave woman is commonly esteemed least for her laboring qualities [and] most for those qualities which give value to a brood mare is also made constantly apparent.” Quoted in Erna Paris, *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies and History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001), 169-170. Another southern writer of the ante-bellum period, Dr. Samuel Cartwright, an eminent physician, added greatly to our knowledge of the African American character. He wrote that some slaves suffered from a newly identified disease which he named “drapetomania”—the compulsion to run away. Fortunately this illness could be cured with nothing more complicated than a whip. He singlehandedly discovered another disease found only in black people. Skilled at finding appropriate names for his scientific discoveries, and obviously something of a Greek scholar, he called this one “dysaesthesia Aethiopica or Hebetude of Mind and Obtuse Sensibility of Body” and explained that it caused “rascality” in the subjects of his scientific inquiries.

of any other oppressed people.”²³ But mainstream historians are sometimes dismissive of Aptheker. One of his milder critics is Orlando Patterson, who praised Aptheker but then wrote that he “sees revolution and rebellion where they can hardly be said to exist, and, out of a romantic conception of proletarian culture...draws conclusions about the revolutionary potential of the American slave that in no way relate to the facts of the case.”²⁴

More difficult to categorize in the controversy over degree of slave resistance are the views of the previously cited Eugene Genovese. Free of any taint of racism, he explains the seeming quiescence of bondsmen as a simple strategy for survival. With respect to the possibilities of a successful slave revolt, he wrote: “those prospects, minimal during the eighteenth century, declined toward zero in the nineteenth...Meeting necessity with their own creativity, the slaves built an Afro-American community life in the interstices of the system... [their] success in forging a world of their own within a wider world shaped primarily by their oppressors, sapped their will to revolt, not so much because they succumbed to the baubles of amelioration as because they themselves were creating conditions worth living in as slaves.” He then went on to write that the very existence of some slave revolts “combated in the most decisive way among both whites and blacks, the racist myth of black docility...the rebels did their best, and weak as their effort was it was a great deal better than nothing.”²⁵ Neil R.

McMillen warns against overlooking “the creative capacities of a people, who, though trapped

23 Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 18.

24 Orlando Patterson, “Slavery,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Volume 3 (1977), 426.

in a physically and psychologically coercive system, were neither childlike nor docile; who, though bought and sold like oxen nevertheless devised safe, often ingenious ways to resist white dominance and influence the rhythms and patterns of their own lives.”²⁶ What seems clear is that there were only seven major slave revolts—two in New York City and then Stono’s, Prosser’s, Louisiana’s, Vesey’s and most famously Nat Turner’s.²⁷ Additionally in the ante-bellum period there were at least two instances when free African Americans reacted violently to white attacks—in Providence in 1831 and Cincinnati in 1841.²⁸ But in 1859, John Brown’s attempt to spark a nationwide uprising of slaves with his raid on Harper’s Ferry failed completely.

The era of Reconstruction was once portrayed by historians as a kind of corrupt idyll for blacks, a period when they, with their scalawag and carpetbagger allies, were in the ascendant and vengefully oppressed long-suffering southern whites. The reality for the most part was very different. “Southern whites...are quite indignant if they are not treated with the same deference that they were accustomed to under slavery,” a Freedman’s Bureau agent observed. In Texas,

25 Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*, 596-7.

26 Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 288.

27 Richard Maxwell Brown, *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 187-188.

28 Graham and Gurr, *Violence in America*, Eds., 389.

one of the killers of the thousand blacks murdered by whites between 1865 and 1868, gave as his motive “did not remove his hat.”

In this post-bellum period, violence became virtually the exclusive province of whites attacking blacks (with an occasional murderous foray by the Klan against Republican whites in the south), and this violence appears to have had its intended effect. A year after Appomattox an abolitionist traveler in the South wrote that Negroes “appear to have neither mind nor hope above their present condition...When addressing their masters they take off their hats and speak in a hesitating, trembling manner as though they were in the presence of a Superior Being.”²⁹ The use of the word “masters” in this context reflects the fact that most recently freed African Americans in the South never received the forty acres and a mule that had been promised by General William T. Sherman, and consequently were reduced to the role of sharecroppers and tenant farmers—an almost negligible step up from slavery.³⁰ Some idea of the level of white discourse on race in the post-bellum years can be gleaned from the assertion by Francis P. Blair, Vice-Presidential candidate of the Democratic Party in 1868 (thankfully he lost) that black men longed to “subject the white women to their unbridled lust.”³¹ Since it was clear to Blair and his ilk that no white woman would ever voluntarily have sex with a black man,

²⁹ James M. McPherson, *The Struggle For Equality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 204.

30 Some 40,000 freedman were briefly settled on what they assumed was their own land, but they were soon compelled to surrender it.

31 Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 340.

that made every black man — potentially at the very least — a rapist. Mia Bey takes this to its logical conclusion: these notional black sexual predators “both necessitated and justified a variety of repressive measures against them—up to and including lynching.”³² Like so many of the most debased things that were said and done in the hundred years prior to the beginning of the freedom movement, this one was mirrored during the freedom movement. In his feudal fiefdom of Plaquemine Parish, Louisiana, a place so murderously dangerous that no rights worker ever set foot there, Leander Perez, the area’s virtual dictator in 1960, told his followers that desegregation was a conspiracy of Zionist Jews and the NAACP. “Don’t wait for your daughter to be raped by these Congolese. Do something about it now!” he warned. And the next day a race riot broke out.³³

How quickly the impulse to right the terrible wrongs of slavery had been vitiated is illustrated by a New York Times editorial in 1876: “Ten years ago the North was nearly united in a feeling of sympathy for the freedmen and in a determination to defend their rights. Now...not a few believe that rights of the whites have been infringed upon.”³⁴ Twenty six years after the fact, Frederick Douglass was moved to describe emancipation as a “tremendous fraud.”³⁵ C.

Vann Woodward tells us that after the Civil War “social and political changes were inspired by a

32 Mia Bey, *The White Image in the Black Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 95.

33 David Goldfield, *Black White and Southern: Race Relations and Southern Culture, 1940 to the Present* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 11-12.

34 Klarman, *Unfinished Business*, 65

North that was in a revolutionary mood determined to stop at nothing short of a complete and thoroughgoing transformation. Yet this new order disappeared even more swiftly than its predecessor.”³⁶ In 1904 a black newspaper asked a sadly unanswerable question: “Should [Negroes] submit tamely and uncomplainingly with the feeling that time will bring the remedy, or should they contend bravely and unceasingly for what they believe right.”³⁷ The choice was not an easy one, with the Governor of Mississippi making explicit what most blacks knew from experience: “every negro in the state will be lynched,”³⁸ if necessary to preserve white supremacy. This was not a chimerical threat. When a black man convicted of rape in Chattanooga was granted a stay of execution by Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan³⁹, a mob, with the acquiescence of the local sheriff, mooted the question with a lynching. The lynching was a not very subtle warning to African Americans not to rely too much on the

35 Douglass speech, April 16, 1888. Frederick Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers Series 2 Volume 1: Narrative*, Eds. John W. Blasingame, John R. McKivigan and Peter Hinko (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1074

36 C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 5.

37 Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 212.

38 The Governor was James Vardaman, elected in 1903. Klarman, *Unfinished Business*, 79.

39 Harlan’s grandson, John Marshall Harlan, II served on the Supreme Court from 1955-1971.

protection of the Supreme Court. The victim's corpse was festooned with a note reading "Come and get your nigger now, Judge Harlan."⁴⁰ Long years later, in 1922, when the Lincoln Memorial was dedicated, the audience was, of course segregated and the speeches stressed Lincoln's role—as did the inscription behind his head—as the man who saved the union. If a lone black man had not spoken, no notice would have been taken of the fact that Lincoln had promulgated the Emancipation Proclamation. No wonder that the new Memorial changed nothing, influenced no one. The words of the second inaugural address are inscribed there. Everyone remembers the beautiful words of the peroration that begin: "With malice towards none." Less noted is the magisterial, prophetic sentence that precedes them: "Yet, if God wills that it [the war] continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."

Emancipation surely was a critically important caesura in the history of African Americans, but nothing changes the fact that for many of them, over the centuries life has remained nasty, brutish and short. As we have seen, attempts to ameliorate the condition of the recently freed slaves were sporadic and largely ineffective. There were successes in the period of Reconstruction, but they were brief, exiguous and rapidly exsanguinated, and then the violent reaction set in.

40 Klarman, *Unfinished Business*, 90.

According to the archives of the Tuskegee Institute, from 1892 to 1940 over 3400 Negroes were lynched. In 1892 alone the rate of lynchings exceeded three each week. Richard Maxwell Brown writes that “the entire lynching ritual was structured to give dramatic warning to all black inhabitants that the iron-clad system of white supremacy was not to be challenged by deed, word, or even thought.” These ritual murders were often announced in the newspapers several days in advance to give country people time to come to town to join the party. The widespread practice of having children observe these hideous events, which were often staged for maximum theatrical effect, emphasizes that lynching was a way of congealing power relationships from generation to generation. And the lynching numbers do not include the countless thousands of blacks who were casually killed by whites because, as Eric Foner tells us, a Negro failed to tip his hat or, unbelievably, because a white man “wanted to thin out the niggers a little.”

In Mississippi, the constitutional convention of 1890 was convoked to enshrine in a document the facts already on the ground—the disenfranchisement of black voters. Neil McMillen wrote at length about how blacks contested the calling of the convention and its results. There were attempts to invalidate the new document’s outrageous revisions regarding the vote in suits filed in both state and federal court. But these suits were unsuccessful. One black man who campaigned to be a convention delegate was lynched. Another who tried to vote in the all white primary had to abandon his 130 acre farm and livestock and flee the state because of threats to him and his family. Even more emotionally wrenching for me is the comment of an African American official of the Republican Party which in the South during this period was a pathetic remnant—and remained so until Richard Nixon’s southern strategy so

successfully revived it. This “leader” told an interviewer “We proselytize these few score Negroes to vote... and after pocketing the handouts from the party slush fund...we put our committee back in mothballs to await another presidential election.” In response to a question he continued, “Hell, naw! We got no local program. We are doctors and preachers and barbers. We make enough money to buy enough liquor to wash the inconveniences of being a nigger out of our brains.”⁴¹ This man’s physical being was intact, but in common with many of his compatriots his humanity had been lynched.

Of course there were always voices of black protest. Unlike Booker T. Washington, the militant black sociologist Ida B. Wells was no accommodator. In the 1890s she wrote that a Winchester rifle should have a place of honor in every black home, and that “the more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged and lynched.”⁴² But hers was a lonely voice at the time, joined by only a few others. In 1903, a black clergyman, despairing of justice in white courts, preached: “Save your race from insult and shame...Be a law unto yourself...Be your own sheriff, court and jury...Die in your tracks, perhaps drinking the blood of your pursuers.”⁴³ There is, however, no evidence that any

41 McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 35-71. Du Bois wrote in W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Pocket Books, 2005), 170, that “the Negro voter was thoroughly inoculated with the idea that politics was a method of private gain by disreputable means.”

42 Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings*, ed. Jacqueline Jones Royster (New York: Bedford Books, 1997), 70.

43 Patterson, *Rituals of Blood*, 226.

of his parishioners had occasion to act on this advice. In 1920 the great W.E.B. Du Bois warned of “that fight for freedom which black and brown and yellow men must and will make unless their oppression and humiliation and insult at the hands of the White World cease.” Then in a poem titled “The Riddle of the Sphinx” he wrote of “the white world’s vermin and filth...valiant spoilers of women and conquerors of unarmed men...I hate them, Oh! I hate them well, I hate them, Christ! As I hate hell.”⁴⁴

In this period there were race riots—a term which at that time meant attacks on blacks by white mobs, or blacks reacting to such attacks—in Wilmington, North Carolina (1898), New York (1900), Atlanta (1906), Springfield, Illinois (1908), East St. Louis (1917—the bloodiest of the twentieth century), plus a poisonous rash of mayhem across the country, including Elaine, Arkansas and Chicago (1919), Tulsa (1921) and what amounted to a pogrom in Rosewood, Florida (1923). In the midst of this bloody chaos, voices on the black Left emerged to preach armed self defense. In 1916, W.E.B. Du Bois “admonished Negro youth to stop spouting platitudes of accommodation and remember that no people ever achieved their liberation without an armed struggle.”⁴⁵ A year later Du Bois seems uncharacteristically to have lost his political compass. He urged in *Crisis*, the journal he edited for the NAACP: “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow

44 W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* (Mineola: Dover Publications, Inc., 1999), 28 and 30-1.

45 Quoted in eds. Graham and Gurr, *Violence*, 382.

citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy.”⁴⁶ Two years later the angry Du Bois of old was back, writing in his essay “The Souls of White Folk”: “The World War was primarily the jealous and avaricious struggle for the largest share in exploiting darker races.”⁴⁷

Back in 1917 the prominent socialist intellectual Hubert Harrison issued a Declaration of Principles for the organization he had founded, the Liberty League, that included these words: “...if the national government should refuse to take any steps to protect its Negro people from murderous mob-violence, then we should call upon our people to defend themselves against murder with the weapons of murder.”⁴⁸ The total implausibility of any action to protect black people on the part of the national government is highlighted by the fact that Woodrow Wilson was President when Harrison wrote those words. It was Wilson who resegregated many federal bureaus and wrote in his *A History of the American People* that it was only natural for southerners to form vigilante groups like the Klan to avoid the rule of “ignorant negroes” and the “incubus” of black voting.⁴⁹ Cyril Briggs, Harlem based leader of the African Black

46 David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 528-531.

47 Du Bois, *Darkwater*, 28.

48 Hubert Harrison, *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, ed. Jeffrey B. Perry (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 91.

49 Philip A. Klinkner with Rogers M. Smith, *The Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 110. It is interesting that Wilson used the word “incubus” in this context. With his academic background he must have known that the word

Brotherhood wrote in 1921: "With the murderer clutching at our throats we can ill afford to choose our weapons, but must defend ourselves with what lies nearest whether that be poison, fire, or what."⁵⁰ But by then it was a long time since a black man had been lynched in New York and perhaps the words of Randall Collins cited above about the inverse relationship between the violence of rhetoric and the distance from danger apply here. The charismatic Marcus Garvey propounded another form of protest. He founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in his native Jamaica, and brought it with him to Harlem in 1916. He appealed to black pride and wrote: "We are determined that we shall have a free country; we are determined that we shall have a flag; we are determined we shall have a government second to none in the world."⁵¹ His idea was for all black people to leave America, return to Africa, and found a country of their own. For a time in the 1920s he claimed to have 31 branches all over the United States and upwards of two million members. His influence faded after his conviction on charges of mail fraud and his imprisonment and deportation, which

referred to a demon who descended during the night and had sex with women while they slept. The obsessive connection between all things black and the sexuality of white women began to recede only after the Supreme Court, in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) nullified all statutes dealing with what southerners then called "miscegenation."

50 Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 209.

51 Quoted in: *Black Protest: History, Documents and Analyses 1619 to the Present*, Joann Grant, Ed., (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1970), 201.

pleased Du Bois, his bitter rival for leadership of the black community,⁵² but some of Garvey's core ideas were replicated in the program of the Black Muslims many years later.⁵³ On a visit to Jamaica King placed a wreath on his tomb and pointed out that he was the first leader of a black mass movement in this country.

In the first half of the twentieth century, notwithstanding black defensive actions and words of protests, lynchings and ever escalating Jim Crow laws advanced apace. In response, the NAACP was formed. The NAACP's approach was to try to use the seemingly plain language of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the Constitution to improve the lives of black people and bring them their fundamental rights. According to Ralph Bunche, later famous for his Nobel Peace Prize,⁵⁴ the result of NAACP litigation was by the 1930s, to make the Negro "a special ward of the U.S. Supreme Court." Bunche went on to write "he has rights only as this august tribunal allows them, and even these are, more often than not, illusory."⁵⁵ Five years

52 Colin Grant, *Negro with a Hat* (London: Vintage Books, 2009), 182.

53 David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 428.

54 Bunche was the UN mediator on Palestine.

55 Ralph J. Bunche "A Critical Analysis of the Tactics and Programs of Minority Groups." Originally published in *Journal of Negro Education*, IV, No. 3 (1935), 195. Reprinted in August Meier, Elliott Rudwick, and Francis L Broderick, Eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980), 196. For Bunche's comments on apathy in the black community see *Ibid*, 190.

later Bunche would write “I have on many occasions heard Negroes exclaim ‘just give us machine guns and we’ll blow the lid off the whole damn business.’”⁵⁶ In frustrated response to this state of affairs, seven years after the Bunche essay, an integrated group of young pacifists came together as CORE, and determined that nonviolent resistance, a radical new (in the United States) approach to what was then called “the Negro problem,” was required. I will return to this subject in a subsequent chapter. Although CORE and the NAACP were initially far removed from mass movements, they participated in some significant advances. Paralleling their activities, the pioneer activist A. Phillip Randolph, leader of the first and most powerful black trade union,⁵⁷ induced President Franklin Roosevelt to outlaw discrimination in federally funded employment during World War II. His success was achieved by threatening a mass march on Washington which he described as “the last resort of a desperate people.”⁵⁸

While it responded with an Executive Order forbidding discrimination in defense employment to head off Randolph’s threat, the Roosevelt administration was far from unambiguously on the side of racial justice. In 1943 there was a deadly race riot in Detroit. The response of FDR’s presumably enlightened Attorney-General, Francis Biddle (Harvard, Harvard Law, Private Secretary to Oliver Wendell Holmes) was to apply the lessons of dealing with

56 Graham and Gurr, Eds., *Violence in America*, 382.

57 The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters

58 Quoted in Andrew E. Kersten, *A. Philip Randolph* (Lanham: Bowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2007), 142.

Japanese-Americans a year earlier to this new context. He wrote the President that “careful consideration should be given to limiting, and in some instances putting an end to Negro migrations...’It would seem pretty clear that no more Negroes should move to Detroit.’” Relocate the Japanese! Curb the movement of African Americans! It all seemed so simple to Biddle.⁵⁹ Would this have required ten million ankle bracelets? It appears that minorities were fortunate that there was no Guantanamo back then.

But in every epoch there were counter-trends. In court cases like *Smith v. Allwright* which in 1944 outlawed the all-white primary, and the equally significant *Shelley v. Kraemer* which barred judicial enforcement of racially restrictive covenants, the rights of minorities were substantially advanced. In the second half of the twentieth century the fractionally but astonishingly successful effort to build on these successes was grounded in the extraordinary commitment of freedom struggle participants to resist nonviolently the existing Jim Crow regime and its attendant evils. It was not until the U.S. Supreme Court took judicial notice of the deleterious effects of segregation, however, that large numbers of white people or even black people became formally involved in the freedom struggle. Without *Brown v. the Board of Education* it’s unlikely that there would have been a Montgomery bus boycott.

In Harlem and other areas of the North, opposition to white supremacy was expressed openly, but in the South sentiments of black race pride and contempt for whites, when expressed at all, were expressed only within the confines of the black community. Lawrence W. Levine tells the story of a Negro college president who convulsed his all black audience when he

59 Shapiro, *White Violence*, 321.

told them of how he had started to save a white woman who had stumbled from a devastating fall, but then pulled back and let her fall when he realized that catching her would violate the strong taboo of a black man touching a white woman. Levine stresses the irony of the woman being a victim of laws and customs that she almost certainly approved of. To me, the striking thing about this anecdote is that the audience was convulsed with laughter at what can only be characterized as an extremely cruel joke.⁶⁰ Richard Wright in his autobiography, still painful to read after so many years, recounts how his friends spoke about whites: “Man, them white folks sure is mean...Whenever I see one I spit...Man, ain’t they ugly.” But he knew as a boy what he made explicit as a man: “the safety of my life in the South depended on how well I concealed from all whites what I felt.”⁶¹ To stay alive in this era it was essential that African Americans learn how to deal with each individual white man they were compelled to deal with. An illustrative anecdote: “Why you niggers have an easier time than I do,” said a puzzled Albany merchant to his black customer. “Yes,” he replied, “and so does yo’ hogs.”⁶² This was a “sassy” answer, the kind that when spoken to the wrong white could have disastrous consequences, but obviously this customer knew how far he could go with this merchant.

60 Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University, 1977), 315.

61 Richard Wright, *Black Boy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 80-81.

62 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 152.

Self defense was always in a separate category — there fighting back was the norm. It took no inspirational words from up North to spur them on when, in 1906, Atlanta black residents armed themselves in self defense and the police took action to disarm them. “The police met with resistance...when [they] opened fire the blacks responded in kind and one officer was killed and another wounded.”⁶³ This is the first instance I have found of organized black resistance to white violence after Reconstruction. The Tulsa riot also involved black armed self-defense, this time on a much larger scale. In Tulsa there was a concerted attempt to protect the black community, both outnumbered and outgunned, black fighters predictably failed. Still, organized self defense was thereafter seen as a viable option, although violent resistance in the post-bellum years seems to have occurred only when the alternative was death.

Meir and Rudwick have written: “In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as conditions grew more hopeless...Negro resentment was most often suppressed into an accommodating acceptance of the status quo. Expressions of such a frame of mind ranged from looking to heaven for solace, to internalizing the white man’s view of the Negro.”⁶⁴ This process was accelerated by a series of craven rulings from the U.S. Supreme Court, the most notorious of which, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, established the doctrine of separate but equal. The court, which as Finlay Peter Dunne’s Mr. Dooley trenchantly pointed out, was sensitive to the political currents of the day, merely codified what was already known and implemented. “Does not the South

63 Shapiro, *White Violence*, 100.

64 August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, eds., *Making of Black America* (New York: Atheneum, 1969) 98.

perceive that all the fire has gone out of the Northern philanthropic fight for the rights of man?" wrote one academic.⁶⁵ It had been a long, long time since that fire and that fight had amounted to anything significant. And except for one brief shining moment in 1904 when a strongly organized boycott of streetcars in many cities of the lower South made it briefly seem that desegregated public transportation might be in reach (the boycott failed to bring about change)⁶⁶ there was not much fire or fight among blacks in the South either.

This might have been in part due to the influence of Booker T. Washington. Neil McMillen endorses this view: "Having struggled for equal rights in the face of impossible odds, a great many — perhaps the great majority—ultimately agreed with Booker T. Washington that accommodation was an acceptable alternative to an unrestrained racial conflict they would surely lose."⁶⁷ At the beginning of the twentieth century Washington became some white people's favorite black man and a much admired and hugely influential leader in his own community. W.E.B. Du Bois tells us that his program "after a confused murmur of protest... silenced, if it did not convert, Negroes themselves."⁶⁸ A brilliant orator and writer with a first

65 Thomas Pearce Bailey, *Race Orthodoxy in the South and Other Aspects of the Negro Question* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 29.

66 McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 293-5.

67 Ibid, 288.

68 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 45.

class mind, Washington had climbed as high as an African American could aspire to do when he became the Principal of Tuskegee Institute. His advice to blacks was to practice the virtues of thrift, hard work and clean living. These practices would be their own rewards and would additionally bring other rewards in the form of concessions from the white world. In his famous speech to the white power structure gathered at the Cotton States and International Exposition in 1895, he described his fellow African Americans as “the most patient, faithful, law abiding and unresentful that the world has seen...In all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress... The wisest among my race understand that the agitation of questions of social equality is the extremist folly...”⁶⁹ He was also explicitly opposed to any kind of political agitation. Black candidates sought his endorsement, but ironically received it only if they “declared constantly that, for Negroes, office-holding was unwise or unimportant.”⁷⁰ His program left no room for any kind of resistance to oppression, let alone the violent kind.⁷¹ There is one recorded instance of his showing a spark of anger. In a speech to a mixed audience, he attacked the race prejudice that

69 Meier and Rudwick, Eds., *Black Protest Thought*, 6-7.

70 August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, eds., *From Plantation to Ghetto, An Interpretive History of American Negroes* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 187.

71 Meier and Rudwick write “Negro resistance to white rioters was minimal...in a period when the sentiment of accommodation to white supremacy, epitomized by Booker T. Washington, was in the ascendancy.” Graham and Gurr, Eds., *Violence*, 388.

he said “was eating away the vitals of the South.”⁷² Still, Du Bois called him “The Great Accommodator.” There was a very basic problem with Washington’s core idea. White southerners were as a group threatened by the success of a black man or woman. Leon Litwack writes of a prosperous black farmer whose possessions and upward mobility attracted attention and resentment, and ultimately, harassment. The farmer said that “the white people was afraid...the money would make the nigger act too much like his own man.”⁷³ When, as a child, Walter White, later the powerful leader of the NAACP in the thirties, forties and early fifties, stood side by side gun in hand with his father, a mail carrier, he heard the white leader of the mob advancing on his house say “let’s burn it down. It’s too nice for a nigger to live in.”⁷⁴ The attack on the White family was an echo of a similar attack eight years earlier when white people in South Carolina were so opposed to the concept of black office holders entering the middle class that they lynched a postmaster.⁷⁵ And in 1935 “R.J. Tyronne was shot to death, apparently by white neighbors who thought he had become too prosperous.”⁷⁶ The definitive white

72 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 47.

73 Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 159.

74 Ibid, 317

75 Klarman, *Unfinished Business*, 86.

76 Payne, *I’ve Got the Light*, 43

response to Washington's attempt to "accommodate" was given by the notorious J.K. Vardaman, then Senator from Mississippi. He said: "I am just as opposed to Booker T. Washington as a voter with all of his Anglo-Saxon reinforcements as I am to the coconut-headed, chocolate-colored typical little coon Andy Dotson, who blacks my shoes every morning. Neither is fit to perform the supreme function of citizenship."⁷⁷

John Hope Franklin mentions in passing that during the 1930s "Negro machine operators in southern textile mills were almost as unthinkable as Negroes dining in white restaurants in the South."⁷⁸ Machine operator was, of course, a "white" job. Another sad postscript to Washington's theory: in 1967 a black worker at the Armstrong Tire and Rubber plant in Natchez was killed by a bomb—obviously planted by his white co-workers. His crime was accepting a promotion to a well-paid job that had previously been considered a "white" job. Roy Wilkins writes, "he was killed simply because he tried to better himself, to get ahead."⁷⁹ So much for the hope that white respect would follow black economic and intellectual success.⁸⁰

77 Lomax, *Negro Revolt*, 40.

78 John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), 543.

79 Roy Wilkins and Tom Matthews, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) 324.

80 Shapiro, *White Violence*, 102.

Chapter 4: Apathy

Habituation to slavery had given him a slave's thoughts and ambitions...[the Negro's] admiration for his tyrannical masters is even greater than his hatred, and his joy and pride reside in his imitation of those who oppress him.—De Tocqueville--1840

The feeling of inferiority is in you, not in any name. The name merely evokes what is already there. Exorcise the hateful complex and no name can ever make you hang your head.—W.E.B. Du Bois--1928

The moment a slave resolves that he will no longer be a slave, his fetters fall. He frees himself and shows the way to others. Freedom and slavery are mental states.—Gandhi--1948

What I have called apathy is a kind of emotional paralysis that resulted from a toxic blend of fear and self-contempt. It was in some ways the most potent force of all for nonviolence. It was a pervasive, mephitic fog that largely blanketed and smothered the inborn impulse to freedom in African Americans. Those who escaped its clotting grip, initially the full-time “field secretaries” of the major civil rights groups, were soon joined as activists by a substantial cadre of men and women whom they succeeded in recruiting. The poet and novelist Robert Penn Warren observed a civil rights meeting presided over by SNCC Leader Bob Moses in 1964: “An aging black man... is saying ‘In foretimes we had a hard way to go—a man go to the office [to register] and sher’ff he made him git out. But Bob Moses first to come and give a inklen of how to git together...teach us the things we should know. About ballots and things... The most trouble is in ourselves, to go up. Not so much afraid — just negligent. We just don’t flock in.’ ‘It’s not apathy,’ someone else gets up to insist. ‘It’s fear — of brutality and economic

revenge.”⁸¹ That under these conditions there was any recruitment at all was an astonishing achievement, but the key fact to note here is that the vast majority of African Americans in this period never had any meaningful involvement with the civil rights movement. Most were resentfully but quiescently empathetic, others simply withdrawn, and a very few became informers for the Klan. The fear of these informers was enough to restrain some people who might otherwise have been involved in retaliatory violence. Nicholas Katzenbach, who served at the highest levels of the Kennedy and Johnson Justice Departments, told me he thought “there was a concern among blacks that the police would know who had done it. Black Mississippi was a poor community, so money [to pay informers] goes a long way. The thought was if we do it we’re going to be caught.”⁸²

Although the black church is widely thought to be the cradle of the movement, that is only a partial truth. Orlando Patterson writes that “most of the Afro-American churches... preached a gospel of spiritual withdrawal and sociopolitical passivity.”⁸³ Newspaperman Simeon Booker wrote in 1964 of the black church: “In civil rights participation its feet are hardly wet. The reason perhaps is that the church is a victim of its own heritage—segregation. Its strength came from segregation, and its leaders hardly shared any desire to shift the foundation...The

81 Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 49.

82 Interview with author, November 4th 2008.

83 Patterson, *Rituals of Blood*, 228.

black church is big business!”⁸⁴ Professor Clarence Taylor shares this view. “There is very little work,” he wrote, “that points out that most black churches in the nation did not participate in the movement. However, a quick survey of church affiliations in the NAACP and the Urban League demonstrates that most churches stayed away from these organizations. Moreover, Joseph Jackson, the president of the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc. was a vocal critic of the civil rights movement. Most black churches were members of the NBC USA and stayed out of the movement.”⁸⁵

One metric of the degree of participation in the freedom struggle can be found in the vote totals in the Mississippi “Freedom Ballot” of 1963. This was an alternative to the illegal essentially all white primary. For the Freedom Ballot there were no artificial barriers to black registration and there was an active attempt by rights workers to maximize participation. Remarkably, as many as 80,000 people, almost all black, voted. This was rightly perceived as a tremendous symbolic step forward.⁸⁶ Still, it must be observed that the impressive figure of 80,000 represented substantially less than 10% of the black population of the state at that time.

84 Simeon Booker, *Black Man's America* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), 111-112.

85 Clarence Taylor, e-mail message to the author, February 7th, 2008. Professor Taylor's comment applies to black churches in the South and the North.

86 Bolstered by the turnout, rights workers the following year helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democrat Party, which sent duly chosen delegates to the Atlantic City Democratic National Convention in 1964. Lyndon Johnson made sure they were not seated.

It was no surprise then, that in the course of my research I read and heard repeated allusions to the simmering resentment of a broad segment of the southern black population, and to the listless apathy that was its evil twin. Social psychologists from all disciplines, and many movement activists observed it. Michael J. Klarman succinctly summarized the challenge facing these activists: “One precondition for eventually overthrowing white supremacy was empowering southern blacks to overcome the norms of deference and subordination that many had internalized in self-defense. Racial change could not occur without southern blacks fighting for it.”⁸⁷ This was an era when, in the South if a black man made eye contact with a white woman, that could be called “eye rape” and lead to a severe beating — or worse. A black person, seeing whites approaching on his side of the street, was expected to step off the sidewalk in a deferential manner. Black men were, irrespective of age, called “boy,” women were called “girl.” This was carried to its logically absurd extreme when for a time some postal workers in Mississippi effaced “Mr.” and “Mrs.” on envelopes thought to be addressed to blacks.⁸⁸ So pervasive was this system of brutal disrespect that it conformed to Michel Foucault’s dictum that “the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary.”⁸⁹ As far back as 1914 the black educator Thomas Pearce Bailey had noted that

87 Klarman, *Unfinished Business*, 108.

88 McMillen, *Dark Journey*, 24.

89 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Book, 1977), 201.

one fundamental tenet of what he called “the racial creed of the southern people [was]...Let there be such industrial education of the negro as will best fit him to serve the white man.”⁹⁰ Cornel West has written: “No other people have been taught systematically to hate themselves — psychic violence — reinforced by the powers of state and civic coercion — physical violence — for the primary purpose of controlling their minds and exploiting their labor for nearly four hundred years.”⁹¹ Orlando Patterson writes: “Afro-Americans were not simply left alone but were actively parasitized for the economic, cultural and psychological benefit of Euro-Americans.”⁹² Small wonder then that many blacks had to be prodded — sometimes not successfully — into taking a positive role in the freedom struggle. Violence against their oppressors was by and large not remotely contemplated. The noted psychiatrist Robert Coles wrote in a 1964 essay that “Negroes in southern towns are heavily apathetic, widely illiterate... and afraid of any protest in their own behalf, let alone joining such protests.”⁹³ His colleague

90 Bailey, *Race Orthodoxy*, 92-93.

91 Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), XIII.

92 Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1997), 177.

93 Robert Coles, “Social Struggle and Weariness,” *Psychiatry* 27, no. 4 (1964), 308.

Alvin Poussaint two years later wrote that “the Negro male generally has come to believe inwardly many of the white man’s ideas of his inferiority.”⁹⁴

Martin Luther King described the members of his community when he arrived in Montgomery in 1955: “Not only did they seem resigned to segregation per se; they also accepted the abuses and indignities which came with it...[Segregation] inflicts the segregated with a false sense of inferiority.”⁹⁵ Ten years later he was still urging his followers to “desegregate our minds” and “remove the shackles of fear.”⁹⁶

The shackles of fear were very real, although there were several ways for blacks to deal with white terror. Seemingly the simplest was to go north, but considerations of economics and family ties often made this impractical. A second way was to give no ground and assert one’s rights as citizen, but although sometimes effective, particularly when done in tandem with others as part of the movement, this could be a radically dangerous course of action. If an African American in the South was in any significant way economically dependent on whites, even so simple an act as attempting to register to vote could result in eviction, loss of employment or a boycott at various choke points in the supply chain of his or her enterprise.

94 Alvin Poussaint, “The Stresses of the White Female Worker in the Civil Rights Movement in the South,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 123 (1966), 403.

95 Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper Collins, 1958), 36-7.

96 Quoted in Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 560.

And there were deadlier punishments for activism; accordingly strategies for survival were devised to evade them. A Mississippi woman told Charles Payne, “I’ve heard old colored women say when whipping young boys with a stick ‘Now I’m gonna beat the hell out of you to keep that white man from killing you! I’m gonna bend you now!’”⁹⁷ There is an illustrative contrast in the response Aaron Henry’s mother gave him when he asked why whites got to go to school for seven months and he went only five months. “She answered that it was because he was smarter than white kids. They needed more time.”⁹⁸ It can’t be just a coincidence that Henry, when he returned from the World War II as a grown man, became the first registered voter in his county, and a few years later an important leader of the NAACP and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Some blacks reacted to it more successfully, but the fear evoked by violent oppression remained the rule, not the exception.

Julius Lester, an early SNCC leader, described what the most popular coping strategies were undoubtedly: “You can laugh and joke with terror, a time honored technique that southern blacks refined into an art form. Or you can try to reach an agreement with it, as in the famous blues line ‘Got one mind for the captain to see, got another mind for what I know is me.’”⁹⁹

97 Payne, *I’ve Got the Light*, 269.

98 Ibid, 17.

99 Julius Lester, *Lovesong: Becoming a Jew* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1988), 25.

Andrew Young, a philosophically committed adherent of nonviolence, has written in dismay: "Virtually everything in their social environment told southern black kids that they were inherently inferior to whites. It required a tremendous leap in consciousness, an ability to disregard the show of contempt experienced in any encounter with white institutions for these young people to demand real equality in American society."¹⁰⁰ It's no wonder then that the eminent psychiatrist Bertram P. Karon found in 1957 a group of southern Negroes whose "whole emotional life was colored by the struggle not to be angry."¹⁰¹ Anne Moody, the young daughter of Mississippi sharecroppers, observed people of her parents' generation in church and angrily wrote that many of them "seemed to be waiting just for God to call them home and end all the suffering...All their lives had been conditioned to Mr. Charlie's do's and don'ts."¹⁰² I attribute to Moody's youth her missing the underlying layer of painfully suppressed resentment of whites that many of her elders were aware of. I have no facile explanation of why the enormously influential Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal would be guilty of the same oversight when he broadly generalized of the black church: "Negro frustration was sublimated into emotionalism, and Negro hopes were fixed in the afterworld."¹⁰³ This overly broad generalization does not do

100 Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 172.

101 Quoted in James W. Vander Zandem, "The Non-Violent Resistance Movement Against Segregation," *American Journal of Sociology* 68 (1963), 546.

102 Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1968), 303 and 331.

justice to the nuanced degrees of resentment and even resistance extant in the community he had examined. The range was wide.

Movement workers Mimi Feingold and Mike Lesser who spent years—not just one summer—working in the South, told me of how upsetting it was when people fifty years their elder would defer to them as if they were persons of authority.¹⁰⁴ Mary King, a white volunteer, wrote in her movement memoir: “...I saw that barriers lay within as well as without and began to believe that our energies would also have to be directed at attitudes, especially the self-contempt and assumptions of inferiority produced by centuries of oppression.”¹⁰⁵ John Lewis, today an eminent and universally admired Congressman, wrote of his sharecropper parents: “There was no weakness in the way my parents and others of their generation shouldered the burden of their time and made the best of it. Fighting back was hardly an option for them. Fight back against whom? With what? My parents and millions of other black men and women just like them bore their load through an age of unbelievable oppression with a grace and dignity I

103 Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), 851. Myrdal’s magnum opus appeared in 1944. It was hugely influential in that it convinced many whites with its scholarship and passion what those whites should have known already: treatment of African Americans was a betrayal of the founding principles of the United States, therefore the central question to be answered was a moral question, and it had to be answered principally by whites.

104 Interview with author, December 12th, 2007

105 Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow/Harper Collins, 1988), 170.

could only hope to come close to. There was not a time nor a place for turning and facing the system.”¹⁰⁶ It should be noted that Lewis himself devoted almost ten years of his life and endured countless beatings and unjust incarcerations in an effort to convince black people of all generations to face the system.

Wyatt T. Walker, who was for a time one of the small tight circle around Martin Luther King, told me, “I think part of [our apathy] may have been we’ve been victims so long that we just learned to live with it. Dr King, he gave us a theology of our suffering that we never had before. I think that was part of his genius.”¹⁰⁷

Another of King’s intimates and partners in struggle, the Reverend James Lawson, thought that too many people in oppressive systems “internalize it and become passive. They may become quite angry in their own family or their own neighborhood. They may even escape into alcohol as the only way to live with themselves. But all of that is part of the same pattern. It does not get redirected to resisting stuff that has you in stress, in pain.”¹⁰⁸

106 John Lewis, *Walking With the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1998), 47

107 Author’s interview, July 11, 2008.

108 Juan Williams, ed., *My Soul Looks Back in Wonder: Voices of the Civil Rights Experience* (New York: AARP/Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., 2004), 49.

Bruce Hilton, who worked for two years in the Delta Ministry, a church based organization that came to Mississippi in 1964 to seek long range solutions to the problem of black poverty, found that many African Americans “had come subconsciously to believe the white man’s assessment of them: they were work animals, slightly less than human, whose only worth was the labor which the bossman, out of his kindness, allowed them to provide.”¹⁰⁹

Bob Moses, who was, with Dr. King, arguably the civil rights movement’s greatest leader, described the black community in 1963 Natchez as “withdrawn, fearful and silent.”¹¹⁰ That this frame of mind could have dire consequences stretching far beyond damage to the individual psyche is tragically illustrated by the legal lynching of Willie McGee. In Laurel Mississippi in 1945 he was convicted of raping a white woman. There was a large body of evidence showing that there was a consensual affair, and the accusation of rape came only after McGee had broken off with the alleged victim. When this defense was hinted at, the Chief Justice of the Mississippi Supreme Court thundered: “If you believe or are implying that any white woman in the South, who was not completely down and out, degenerate, degraded and corrupted, could have anything to do with a Negro man, you not only do not know what you are talking about, but you are insulting us, the whole South. You do not know the South, and do not realize that we could not entertain such a proposition, that we could not even consider it in court!” When the black reporter Carl Rowan talked to local black people he discovered that it was well known in the

¹⁰⁹Bruce Hilton, *The Delta Ministry* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 109.

¹¹⁰Mary King, *Freedom Summer*, 243.

black part of town that there had been a consensual relationship — not a rape — but not one person would come forward to defend McGee because it was understood that to do so would mean death at the hands of those who preferred not to hear the truth. McGee, in his last letter to his wife wrote, “Tell the people the real reason they are going to take my life is to keep the Negro down in the South. They can’t do this if you and the children keep fighting.”¹¹¹

This assessment of the motivation for the vigilante impulse in white Mississippi was accurate, as is emphasized by another tragedy, chosen from an array of examples available to students of that era and place. In 1961 an NAACP activist engaged in voter registration activities, Herbert Lee, was murdered in broad daylight by a white Klansman. There were several black eyewitnesses to the crime, but they were all pressured to say — untruthfully — that Lee was killed in self-defense. One of these black witnesses, Lewis Allen, let it be known that he was ready to recant, but the killer had already been acquitted. From that day forward Allen was marked for death, and he knew it. The day before he was to leave the state forever, he too was gunned down.

Those who were most directly affected by white vigilante violence understood the motives for it best. In testimony given to the United States Civil Rights Commission in 1965, a black sharecropper named William Brown Eskridge spoke of the massacre at the Carroll County, Mississippi courthouse eighty years earlier, when a white mob murdered many blacks. He told the commissioners that the purpose of the slaughter “was to enslave the minds of colored people” and that the effects of that incident persisted: “Now mind this continues: this didn’t

111 Shapiro, *White Violence*, 395-401.

stop there. We had less violence, but it continued through the years. Whenever a colored man was killed, nothing done about it. Whenever a white man got ready to hit one over the head, he hit him over the head and asked if he liked it, and he had to tell them that he did. Simply to molest and keep his mind in slavery.” And he added with a sophistication that belied his lack of formal education: “Then there was economic reason too that they tried their best to keep them that way.”¹¹²

People who were aware of the proliferation of the type of incomprehensively vicious acts described by Eskridge, predictably and logically saw them as an outgrowth of a kind of mass insanity¹¹³ that affected many white southerners. Nevertheless, it should be pointed out that there were always some white voices which resisted the insanity. Historian Jason Sokol writes that in the aftermath of World War II, “Rampant bigotry and violence against African Americans often upset white southerners much more than black demands and movements appealed to them. Those who began to change their racial views were often repelled by white supremacy, not compelled by civil rights.”¹¹⁴ There has always been, even in the worst of times, what was then called “a better element” that quietly deplored some of the worst excesses of

112 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, hearings, Jackson MS, February 1965, 96-7

113 A man whose opinion on any subject he chooses to address is worthy of attention, has written: “... man has within him a lust for hatred and destruction...it is a comparatively easy task to call it into play and raise it to the power of a collective psychosis.” Albert Einstein, *Why War?* (Knoxville: CAT Publishing Co., 1991), 201.

114 Jason Sokol, *There Goes My Everything* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 31.

their neighbors. The operative word here is “quietly.” In 1964 the execrable Governor of Mississippi, Ross Barnett, walked into the courtroom where the murderer of Medgar Evers was on trial and ostentatiously shook his hand, presumably to show solidarity with the coward who shot Evers in the back. Unsurprisingly, the better element did not speak out. As Lolis Elie, the brilliant civil rights attorney who is still very much a presence in the New Orleans of today, said in another but related context: “Well, they’re moderates, but they haven’t made as much noise as even moderates would be expected to make.”¹¹⁵ By their cowardice the “better element” made themselves completely irrelevant.

In any event, as Eskridge intuited, madness alone was not the sole motive of the white perpetrators of psychological and physical violence. It doesn’t require a rigid Marxist analysis to perceive that maintaining a Negro underclass had the effect of keeping downward pressure on the wages of black and white workingmen, and that the sharecropping arrangements of that era created a wealthy class of plantation owners, some of whom lived very well and worked not much more than their slave-owning forbears. Obviously it was to the advantage of the oppressors to impose not simply their power, but also what the brilliant anarchist and political theorist Antonio Gramsci referred to as a “conception of the world.” Gramsci’s biographer writes that his originality lay in his argument that the system’s “real strength does not lie in the violence of the ruling class or the coercive power of its state apparatus, but in the acceptance by the ruled of a conception of the world that belongs to the rulers.”¹¹⁶ In a similar vein, writing of the Nazi SS, holocaust survivor David Rousset wrote, “They know that the system which

¹¹⁵Quoted in Warren, *Who Speaks*, 32.

succeeds in destroying the victim before he mounts the scaffold...is incomparably the best for keeping a whole people in slavery.”¹¹⁷ Rousset was also author of the chilling aperçu: “the normal person does not know what man is capable of.” In that sense southern blacks were not normal. They knew only too well what man is capable of. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu framed the concepts of symbolic violence and also of symbolic power, which he wrote is exercised “only through the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it...”¹¹⁸ These are powerful ideas, but there is merit to the heavily qualified modification attached to them by James C. Scott. Scott asserts that “the poor, *when they may do so with relative safety*, display an impressive capacity to penetrate behind the pieties and rationales of the rich.[Italics mine]”¹¹⁹ Gramsci himself was no stranger to the coercive power of the state, which threw him into prison for eleven years—where he died, aged forty six. He was writing of the struggle for what he called hegemony between the fascists and the Left in the Italy of his

116 Giuseppe Fiori, *Antonio Gramsci: Life of a Revolutionary*, trans. Tom Nairn (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1971), 238.

117 Quoted in Hannah Arendt, *The Portable Hannah Arendt* ed. Peter Baehr (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 135.

118 Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 164.

119 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 304.

time, so it is appropriate to ask if his ideas and those of Rousset and Bourdieu have application to the civil rights era in the South. My answer is: Yes, but...

Many blacks back then succumbed to the Gramsci effect at some point in their lives. An egregious example was furnished by an African American named Zeak Crumpton, who wrote in a letter to the editor of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* in 1963: "But for slavery, I would walk around with a metal ring in my nose. On holidays we would feast on elephants' toes, roasted grasshoppers, and the milk of a coconut. I get on my knees each night and thank God for permitting my ancestors to come to America as slaves." The newspaper saluted him in an editorial as "a credit to his race." And a Virginia Congressman thought so highly of the letter that he had it read into the Congressional Record.¹²⁰ This was, in the totality of its self-contempt, an anomaly. Ultimately, for African Americans, it became possible to realize their own worth as human beings either on their own or with collaboration of movement volunteers. At a church meeting in Mississippi in 1961 "a woman who at first had opposed her son's participation in the movement testified one night that her son had questioned her closely about whether she felt it was right to be considered a second-class citizen in America and just accept it as a matter of course. 'Finally the cobwebs commenced a-movin' from my brain,' she testified. Everyone in the hall knew what she meant."¹²¹

120 Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 132.

121 Young, *An Easy Burden*, 150.

Anyone who volunteered to testify before the Civil Rights Commission, like the 25,000 registered to vote in Mississippi,¹²² and the 50,000 in Alabama, had left Gramsci behind and was accordingly a marked person. The men and women who did come forward were probably afraid, but they weren't going to let fear deter them from doing what they believed was right. A case in point is the testimony (abbreviated by me) of Jesse James Brewer of Tallahatchie County, Mississippi:

Commissioner Hesburgh: You were in the Army overseas in World War II from roughly 1942 to 1946? *Is that correct?*

Brewer: That is correct.

Hesburgh: Did you feel like a citizen when you were in the Army?

Brewer: Sure did. In fact it is the only time I felt like a man, when I was in the Army.

Hesburgh: Well, then you got back home. Didn't you feel like continuing to be a man and citizen and to vote?

Brewer: No, sir.

Hesburgh: Why not?

Brewer: Well, I wasn't treated as a man. I was treated as a boy.

¹²² Payne notes that while this represented a ten-fold increase in fifteen years, it was "hardly impressive in a state with an adult Negro population of nearly half a million." Payne, *I've Got the Light*, 27.

Hesburgh: You say you had two battle stars. What campaigns were they?

Brewer: That was in Wadai, New Guinea, and Russell Island.

Hesburgh: It took you a long time from the time you got back until the time you got around to registering. How would you explain that?

Brewer: Well, they had taken a long time—when they draft me into the Army they would always teach me that I had freedom to speak and democracy and I was fighting for freedom to speak. I had freedom to speak as long as I was in the Army. But after I got out and got back here, my freedom run out. I didn't have freedom to speak any more after I got discharged.

Hesburgh: Suddenly, a year ago you began to try to register. What influenced you to do that?

Brewer: I had two brothers got beat up by white men without any reason. I didn't like that and was trying to have something done about it by getting in touch with different people. I got in touch with COFO¹²³ and those people would tell me I could register to vote, which I didn't know I could. My parents always told me the Negroes wasn't allowed to vote.¹²⁴

123 COFO was the Council of Federated Organizations, an umbrella group which included all the civil rights organizations working in Mississippi.

124 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. Hearings, Jackson Ms. February, 1965, 133-134

The head of the Harvard Center for the Study of Violence illuminated this man's psyche when he wrote: "Progress destroys fatalism and hopelessness by showing that relative deprivation is not necessary or eternal."¹²⁵

Clarence Hall, Jr. a black farmer, told the Commissioners that when he spoke at meetings he told those assembled that if they voted "the government will not call us monkeys, coon and things. When the man who's running for office holler loudest the word 'nigger' he won't get elected if we can vote like every other citizen."¹²⁶

It's not hard to understand the pain and rage in the words of these men, all of whom had spent their whole lives in the Jim Crow South. But note the words of Roger Wilkins. Wilkins is the son of highly educated parents. He went to high school, college and law school in Michigan and his life reads as an uninterrupted string of accomplishments, among others Assistant Attorney General, Pulitzer prize-winning writer, Professor of History. This background is important context for what he has written of his early years in the South: "I had bought the fantasy of white superiority, the notions that my thick lips and kinky hair were somehow inferior to the genetic legacies of Europe. I had been ashamed of my skin, my genes and myself. White America was not simply fraudulent, it was full of a systematic and deliberate cruelty that had deprived my fellow black Americans and me of our essence as human beings—self-respect and

¹²⁵James Gilligan, *Violence: Reflections on a National Epidemic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 202.

¹²⁶Commission on Civil Rights, 38.

internalized dignity.”¹²⁷ When Wilkins wrote, the problem was obviously not a new one. In 1855 the escaped slave and abolitionist Samuel Ringgold Ward wrote that it was to be wondered that “what with slavery and Negro-hate, the mass of us are not either depressed into idiocy or excited into demons.”¹²⁸ Compare this to what his more famous contemporary Frederick Douglass, escaped slave, author, lecturer, diplomat, and confidant of Presidents, wrote of his state of mind aged sixteen in 1834 while still a slave: “I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished. The disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!”¹²⁹ Leon Litwack writes: “Even as the black southerner struggled to achieve some semblance of dignity, to hang onto his self esteem, the dominant society seemed intent on denying him his very identity, his very humanity.”¹³⁰ In this frame of mind neither violent nor nonviolent resistance to the forces of oppression could have seemed practical options. Fortunately Wilkins, Ward and Douglass were able to break out of their psychological prisons. Clearly many others were not.

127 Roger Wilkins, *A Man's Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), 236.

128 Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Slave* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1970), 21.

129 Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 49.

130 Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, 478.

The noted anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker spent two years studying the black community in Indianola, Mississippi in the early 1930s. She found that the major adaptation of blacks to their circumstances was to adopt the demeanor of a deferential, unaggressive and forbearing person when relating to whites. It was not just the imbalance of power that caused blacks to behave this way, she found. The residue of slavery had made a gentle submissive mien a firmly grounded tradition.¹³¹

When African Americans climbed the stairs to the segregated balcony of a movie theater, the facsimiles they saw of themselves on the screen did nothing to improve their self image, or depict possible alternative modes of conduct. Negro actors in the '30s and '40s were forced to be complicit in their own dehumanization as they were repeatedly compelled to don a nightmarish jester's cap and literally make fools of themselves. A select few blacks were permitted to retain some small shred of dignity playing the abjectly faithful servant of some white person. They were among the very few exceptions who were not depicted as lazy, stupid, and cowardly. In the early 1940s, the powerful head of the NAACP, Walter White, convoked a luncheon meeting of Hollywood film studio heads and prominent producers at which he declared that his organization didn't ask that the Negro be depicted as a superhuman hero, but rather as "a normal human being and integral part of human life." Those whose memories stretch back that far will not be surprised that even his modest request that blacks be viewed as normal seems to have invoked a veritable epiphany in some of his luncheon guests. Darryl Zanuck remarked: "I make one sixth of the movies made in Hollywood and I never thought of

¹³¹Hortense Powdermaker, "The Channeling of Negro Aggression by the Cultural Process." *American Journal of Sociology*, XLVIII (1943), 750-758.

this until you presented the facts.”¹³² White had long recognized the enormous power of film to shape events. In 1939 he had written: “Whatever sentiment there was in the South for federal anti-lynch law, evaporated with the *Gone with the Wind* vogue.”¹³³

Powdermaker wrote of a deep strain of religiosity in the black community that also played its part in suppressing resistance. Teachers and ministers in churches of all denominations preached that hatred of the oppressor is unchristian. This in effect echoed what black and white religious leaders in the South were preaching during slavery. The celebrated Berkeley historian Kenneth Stamp wrote that “through religious instruction the bondsmen learned that slavery had divine sanction...that eternal salvation would be their reward for faithful service.”¹³⁴ For some in the civil rights era, the learned philosophy of loving one’s neighbor informed every aspect of their lives. For others the lesson was that when they felt anger and hatred they must suppress it—because not to do so made them feel guilty, and also could be very dangerous. For yet another group the lessons meant nothing. They hated and they despised, but knew that such feelings could never be expressed openly.

What Powdermaker found in the 1930s could be described as negative peace, an equilibrium maintained only by the mostly sullen acceptance by blacks of their condition which

¹³²Peter Noble, *The Negro in Films* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 79.

¹³³Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46.

¹³⁴Kenneth Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 158.

minimized the potential for violence. In the 1940s the cautious beginning of the end of this equilibrium, became in the 50s and 60s an irreversible trend. An early sign of change was observed in Birmingham when “over the course of twelve months beginning in September 1941, there were...fifty-five... open acts of defiance in which African Americans either refused to give up their seats or sat in the white section” of city buses.¹³⁵ Most observers attribute the increased signs of militancy to the onset of the Second World War. Black workers went North and West for good jobs in defense plants, and when they came back home they knew that they had options. On the other hand black men in the Armed Forces were segregated and often not accorded the respect due them.¹³⁶ In 1942, a very young Bayard Rustin wrote “I have heard hundreds of Negroes hope for a Japanese military victory since ‘it doesn’t matter who you’re a slave for.’”¹³⁷ But as veterans, they took pride in their service and they had learned to handle weapons. In 1946 in Tennessee when a black veteran talked back to a white store owner, a lynching was threatened. Local blacks organized and “the white crowd downtown quickly lost its

135 Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels — Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996) 58-9.

136 Some idea of the atmosphere in our World War II army can be gleaned from an official communiqué written by General Simon Bolivar Buckner, Army commander in Alaska. Blacks were working on the roads there but he demanded their speedy removal lest they “interbreed with the Indians and Eskimos and produce an astonishingly objectionable race of mongrels.” Because of his good work and attitude Buckner was promoted to command the 10th Army in the Pacific. Buckner quote in Christopher Paul Moore, *Fighting for America: Black Soldiers—the Unsung Heroes of World War II* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005), 75. For an unblinking look at the disparities in treatment between black and white soldiers see Alice Kaplan, *The Interpreter* (New York: Free Press, 2005).

137 Bayard Rustin, “The Negro and Nonviolence,” *Fellowship* VIII (1942), 167.

desire to invade the neighborhood of armed blacks.”¹³⁸ 1946 was the year that black Mississippi veterans campaigned successfully for the notorious Theodore Bilbo, who once proposed sending every black person in America to Liberia at government expense, to be refused his seat in the United States Senate. And in 1948, prospects for justice were greatly strengthened with the poor showing at the polls of the breakaway Dixiecrat party and the election of Harry Truman as President. Truman quickly issued an Executive Order desegregating the armed forces. Even the enormous cultural power of films began, in 1949, to reinforce blacks’ sense of their own worth. Sidney Poitier, in a series of roles, played an almost superhumanly good and strong man. Juano Hernandez, in the fine but now mostly forgotten film of William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust*, played a character who had always existed in the South but in miniscule numbers—a proud black man who tipped his hat to no one, moved off the sidewalk for no one, and refused to call the white man “sir.” This was the kind of behavior that could get someone killed in a small Mississippi town, but Lucas, as he is called, is so sure of exactly who he is that he shrivels the aggressive impulses of racist bullies, as doubtless his real life prototypes were able to do.

In 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education* the Supreme Court ruled that the doctrine of separate but equal was no longer legal. In the South almost nothing changed at first, but the psychological impact of *Brown*, when paired with the pride evoked by the emergence of independent black nations on the African continent and in the Caribbean a few years later, was enormous. It is no coincidence that just a year after the nullifying of *Plessy v. Ferguson* Rosa Parks refused to move to the back of the bus and Martin King emerged as the leader of a mass

138 Sokol, *There Goes My Everything*, 32.

movement for civil rights that changed everything.¹³⁹ In the words of the popular song “Rosa sat so Martin could march”¹⁴⁰ and when he marched he “succeeded in moving people from inactivity and quiet rage to overt action...Out of incoherent anger at the evils of racism he was able to generate motion...”¹⁴¹ After 1955 and throughout the 1960s “hegemony” and “symbolic violence” receded rapidly in the African American South. Ed Brown, a black activist from the movement’s early days, remembers an article that Roger Wilkins, then at *The Washington Post*, wrote after interviewing black Mississippians in the early 1970s. One young man told Wilkins (in Brown’s recollection) when asked if the movement had accomplished anything, “Well, I won’t say that nothing has changed. But if I had to talk about what was the most significant change—that would be that *black people learned to manage their fears*. Not bitter—but much more rational than before the movement.”¹⁴²

Amzie Moore was one of those Mississippi African Americans who appear never to have felt fear or a lack of self worth. Bob Moses described him as a man “who lives like a brick wall in

139 Many students of the movement have pointed to the brutal murder and mutilation of fourteen year old Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955 as another factor in strengthening the resolve of activists all over the country.

140 The song continues “Martin could march so Barack could run and Barack won, so now all our children can fly.”

141 Shapiro, *White Violence*, 430.

142 Italics mine. Interview with author, February 21st, 2008.

a brick house, dug into this country like a tree beside the water.”¹⁴³ A World War II veteran and successful entrepreneur, he had been active in the freedom struggle long before SNCC appeared on the scene in the early 60s. He and compatriots like Aaron Henry and the martyred Medgar Evers evinced extraordinary courage, working for justice at a time when merely attempting to register could and often did provoke a fatwa from the Klan. It was also in those early days a time when their deaths—or the death of any black protestor— would have gone completely unremarked by the white world at large as they faced the very real possibility of assassination. Even the most egregious examples of murderous brutality went unreported in the mainstream press. When their fellow activist the Reverend George Lee, described by Ralph Abernathy as a “stalwart hero who could barely read or write,”¹⁴⁴ was felled by a shotgun blast at close range, his face and neck were ripped off and had to be sutured together at the funeral home. The county coroner announced the cause of Lee’s death as an automobile accident. When asked about the hundreds of pellets still lodged Lee’s in his head, the sheriff who was alleged to have investigated the case replied “Oh, they’re just dental fillings.”¹⁴⁵ None of that managed to make the papers. Nor did the murders of Charles Moore and Henry Dee by a frenzied mob of

143 Eric Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them, Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 28.

144 Sermon by Dr. Ralph Abernathy, April 8, 1968. Reprinted in eds. Clayborne Carson et.al, *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader Civil Rights Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 420.

145 Payne, *I’ve Got the Light*, 38.

Klansmen — almost exactly one month before the very similar murders of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney. Because Schwerner and Goodman were white, dozens of FBI men flooded the state and somehow located the bodies in an earthen dam later that summer. No FBI agents looked for Moore and Dee when they disappeared. Of course the differing focus, the intensity of the search for the killers of white boys, was exactly what had been anticipated. It was certainly part of the hard headed, unsentimental reasoning that led movement leaders to invite hundreds of Stanford and Ivy League college students to spend that summer of 1964 in Mississippi.

In the early 1950s Amzie Moore had been successfully active in voter registration efforts, but after *Brown v. Board* white resistance increased and he had to watch as the black voting rolls were slashed by more than half. Blacks pushed back against White Citizens Council members who were working successfully to decimate voter rolls. Council members soon found themselves squeezed by retaliatory African American boycotts. The whites' first response was to pressure blacks with the same economic weapon. Payne sees this as a sign of weakness: "Their initial reliance on economic pressure reflects a desire to find some alternative to violence...[but] black leaders forced whites to use violence by refusing to yield to anything less. Thus, the level of white violence is an ironic index of the forcefulness of black activism."¹⁴⁶ 1955 was the year that white murderers took the lives of George Lee, Emmett Till, Lamar Smith and Roy Melton among others. Gus Courts was shot and forced to leave the state. The ironic index was rising. But in 1961 when the first SNCC volunteers arrived, Amzie Moore was still in place, battling.

146 Ibid, 41.

Here is how he described his reaction to the young workers who spread out across the state. The activists, he said, stood at the courthouses among “triggermen and drivers and lookout men riding in automobiles with automatic guns...how they stood...how gladly they got in the front of that line, those leaders—and went to jail! It didn’t seem to bother ‘em. It was an awakening for me...”¹⁴⁷ Not all the local people viewed those early SNCC arrivals the same way. Matt Suarez, a field secretary, told me of his initial reception in Canton: “A lot of time was spent just trying to convince locals of the righteousness of your cause. People were intimidated, people were frightened, they had been frightened all their lives. They didn’t want to associate themselves with you. They had been warned about the outside agitators, and they were warned of reprisals. A very limited number of people opened their arms to you...some really brave people, like the Chin family, the entire family, they decided early this was the right thing to do and they were gonna be with it come hell or high water... We had Mrs. Devine who came out right away, she was a schoolteacher and an insurance agent and she said ‘let the chips fall where they may.’ She knew what she had to do...We had the Robinsons, father and son. The father didn’t come out too much behind us, but the son did. He was willing to step up.”¹⁴⁸

Passivity had never been an issue for people like these. One of Amzie Moore’s comrades was a land owning farmer named Hartman Turnbow. Lawrence Guyot, the first Chairman of the Freedom Democratic Party, told me that Turnbow shot and killed a Klansman who was attacking

147 Quoted in: Bob Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek* (Montgomery: New South Books, 2008), 263.

148 Interview with author, October 8th, 2008.

his home and attempting to burn it down with his family inside – and never suffered any consequences. Guyot explains: “The state of Mississippi had a tremendous problem. The state of Mississippi said ‘do we want to charge a man with murder for bringing his family out of his burning house and defending himself against numerous people with guns?’ So, the decision was made by the state of Mississippi, that this man died of a heart attack.”¹⁴⁹ By this time, because of African Americans like Moore and Turnbow,¹⁵⁰ in the black community at large, apathy, although it was not quite dead— was moribund. The major transformation now was from a culture of resistance to oppression that consisted of isolated acts of heroism, to a coordinated, conscious grand strategy that had as its centerpiece a non-negotiable commitment to nonviolence. All the major civil rights groups shared this commitment, although among themselves they differed on tactical emphasis, degrees of militancy and pride of place in influence and fund-raising. But the new paradigm was not universally recognized or acknowledged. At least one respected white academic was too unaware—or too fixed in his prejudices— to appreciate what was going on around him. *After* the bus boycott, *after* the sit-ins and in the middle of the freedom rides, James Q. Wilson wrote: “As the Negro has progressed, he has come to expect more and more in terms of equal treatment and improved

149 Interview with author November 17th, 2008.

150 After passage of the Voting Rights bill in 1965, Turnbow told an interviewer how that legislation had altered the racial landscape: “Anybody hadda told me ‘fore it happened that conditions would make this much change between the white and the black in Holmes County, here where I live, why I woulda just said you’re lyin’...But it got to workin’ just like the citizenship class teacher told us.” Ronald W. Walters, *Freedom is Not Enough: Black Voters, Black Candidates and Presidential Politics* (Lanham Md.: Row & Littlefield, 2007), 14. Citizenship classes for people who had been denied a decent education by the state of Mississippi were an important feature of COFO’s 1964 Freedom Summer.

conditions. Yet for all this heightened sense of urgency, relatively little in the way of Negro protest activity seems to occur.”¹⁵¹ That “relatively little” had enormous positive consequences, all of which were achieved without any preemptive or retaliatory violence on the part of those who wrested them from a hostile milieu.

151 James Q. Wilson, “The Strategy of Protest,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 3 (1961), 294.

Chapter 5: The Philosophically Committed

I recognize that I have one right alone: that of demanding human behavior from the other. One duty alone: that of not renouncing my freedom through my choices – **Frantz Fanon**

In this chapter I will argue that success in the struggle to destroy Jim Crow was predicated on the counterintuitive but tenaciously held belief in the power of nonviolence to defeat oppression and on the characters of the small band of African Americans, mostly from the South, who clung to this belief. Martin Luther King, Jr., James Lawson, Bayard Rustin, Bob Moses, John Lewis, Bernard Lafayette, Wyatt T. Walker, Andrew Young, Fred Shuttlesworth and a few more like them came to have enormous influence in the black communities of the former Confederacy. I believe that this influence was broad, and attracted tens of thousands of formerly quiescent people to actively join the cause, but the influence was not deep, because only a tiny minority of those who flocked to their banner shared their philosophical commitment to what Mohandas Gandhi called *satyagraha*.¹⁵² The intellectual power, the moral stature of these men ensured that *satyagraha* would remain at the heart of the movement in the 1950s and 1960s as it had in the 1940s. But most of their followers were completely comfortable not only with the idea but with the actuality of violent self-defense. When the Klan drove into black neighborhoods all over the South they were not met with the calm acceptance of redemptive suffering that was expected of people engaging in direct action or attempting to register. More likely than not the racists were met with buckshot and bullets. Violence to protect one's family and home was something that everyone, including northern liberals and

¹⁵²This was a compound word that Gandhi created from elements in the Sanskrit scripture the Bhagavad Gita. It means soul-force or love-force and encompasses an active resistance to evil that is completely free of hatred or anger.

many white southerners, could empathize with. It was accepted and essentially non-controversial, presumably even in law enforcement circles and possibly within the Klan itself. King himself all but endorsed it when he wrote, "When the Negro uses force in self-defense he does not forfeit support – he may even win it by the courage and self respects it reflects."¹⁵³ And then there was Hartman Turnbow's justifiable homicide converted into a heart attack by a Mississippi sheriff.

Because it was limited to self-protection none of that fighting back diminishes in any way the centrality of nonviolence to the struggle. Nonviolence was a concept rooted in an ancient religious and philosophical tradition. It can be found in Buddhism, Taoism, the Gita and the Old and New Testaments. In modern times its most noteworthy exponents have been Mennonites, Quakers, Thoreau, Tolstoi and Gandhi running in a straight line to A. Philip Randolph and Martin King. One writer points to four quotations from the New Testament and identifies them as the "Charter of Nonviolence in the West": "Blessed are the meek...Love thine enemies...Turn the other cheek...He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword."¹⁵⁴ On the other hand, in the Old Testament there are instances too numerous to count of violent acts which were committed with the express approval of God. And it sometimes appears that even Jesus was as conflicted about violence as have been most of his followers: see Matthew 10:34

153 William Robert Miller, *Martin Luther King, Jr.: His life, Martyrdom and Meaning for the World* (New York: Weybright and Talley, Inc., 1968), 83.

154 Lanza del Vasto, *Warriors of Peace* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974), 194.

and Luke 22:36. Thoreau and Emerson, counter-intuitively, were impassioned defenders of John Brown when he was about to be hanged after Harper's Ferry.¹⁵⁵

The cradle of the modern civil rights movement was the University of Chicago chapter of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), an organization totally committed to pacifism. A group of theology students, several of whom had been in jail for resisting the draft, met to discuss ways of eliminating segregation in this country. Following early discussions, James Farmer, himself a conscientious objector, wrote a memo to A.J. Muste, then head of the Fellowship, proposing the creation of what would become CORE.¹⁵⁶ In the memo he makes clear his debt to Gandhism, specifically as reinterpreted by Krishnalal Shridharani in his book *War Without Violence*.¹⁵⁷ But right at the start, Farmer planted the seeds of the tortured ambiguity that imbued subsequent discussions of nonviolence in the movement. He wrote: "[the] movement ...must seek to draw mass following. Therefore [it] cannot be limited to pacifists but must try to 'mobilize' all persons who want to see an end to racial discrimination in America, and are willing to commit

155 Henry David Thoreau, *A Plea for Captain John Brown* (Whitefish MT: Kessenger Publishing, 2004)

156 Farmer, a charismatic Howard University graduate, led CORE from 1961 to 1965, the years of its greatest prominence. In 2007 he was a central character in *The Great Debaters* a historically accurate film about a group of students in a black college in Texas who took on the Harvard College debating team – and won. A.J. Muste graduated from the Union Theological Seminary *magna cum laude* before World War I, for a time migrated to revolutionary Marxism-Leninism, but in the mid 1930's returned to Christian Pacifism as head of FOR.

157 Krishnalal Shridharani, *Selections from War Without Violence* (New York: Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1939).

themselves to a disciplined nonviolence in working toward that goal.” Farmer continued: “If such an endeavor is not to degenerate into violence and chaos, pacifists must serve as its nucleus, its moving force...Such a program must be on a religious base if it is to possess genuine motive power...” It was in a “Supplemental Memorandum of Brotherhood Mobilization” that Farmer created (I believe) the term “nonviolent direct action” which he defined as “economic boycott, noncooperation, pickets, demonstrations, civil disobedience etcetera.” From the first, the new organization was controversial within FOR. Ideas like boycotting and picketing obviously entailed an element of coercion that was not congenial to some members, and eventually CORE was split off from FOR as a completely separate organization. Farmer quotes the following conversation between himself and Muste:

MUSTE: How do you expect to maintain a pacifist emphasis in CORE if it’s not under the umbrella of FOR?

FARMER: I don’t. CORE should not be a pacifist organization, but rather it should bring pacifists and non-pacifists together under a commitment to nonviolence as a tactic, a device for fighting racism.¹⁵⁸

Shortly after that, when CORE had become a national organization, it published a pamphlet titled *Rules for Action*. Rule three read: “A CORE member will make a sincere effort to avoid malice or hatred toward any group or individual.” And perhaps most central, Rule 6: “He will meet the anger of any individual or group in the spirit of good will and creative

158Ibid, 111.

reconciliation; he will submit to assault and will not retaliate in kind by act or word.” That so many movement participants continued to live by these rules for so long is one of the glorious mysteries of that era.

James Robinson was one of Farmer’s first white collaborators and in a letter to the author dated October 6, 2004 he writes: “In early Chicago (1942-43) breaking the color line was very soon equally weighted with learning to apply Gandhian techniques, but in many of the other local groups pacifists tended to put nonviolence first and integration second—which could lead to long delays on taking any action...[Much later] by 1961 or 1962, with CORE’s expansion southward, religion was very important for many in the South, but in the North, less so. Pacifists, while still a vital part of CORE, were no longer predominant...and by the end of Farmer’s regime nonviolence was soft-pedaled.”

In fact by the end of the Farmer years he himself had definitely abandoned the absolutist pacifist position when a howling lynch mob was searching for him in Plaquemines, Louisiana. In his book *Freedom When?*, he writes: “I often quoted Gandhi to the effect that I would much prefer to see a man resist evil with violence than fail to resist evil out of fear.”¹⁵⁹ Farmer was saved by a group of armed men who smuggled him out of town in a hearse.

In the early Chicago years Farmer was often assisted by Bayard Rustin, a field representative for FOR who later gained fame as the coordinator of the 1963 March on Washington, and as one of Martin King’s teachers in the strategies of nonviolence. Rustin was

159Ibid, 20.

more of an “absolutist” (Farmer’s term) when it came to pacifism and never actually joined CORE. But Rustin was a tireless, brave and effective worker for racial justice. He was raised in the Quaker religious tradition but parted from that tradition, since, as Mulford Sibley tells us, certain groups, including the Quakers, “think of [nonviolence] as a personal religious commitment, and, in fact, argue that it cannot be a strategic instrument of politics.”¹⁶⁰

Nonviolent resistance was a key strategy, but boycotts, sit-ins and freedom rides, no matter how infused with love the participants were, still unavoidably contained elements of defiance and coercion that were not compatible with a consistently pacifist position. That of course was why CORE could not remain a dependency of FOR.

Rustin and the other interracial participants in the first Freedom Ride in 1947 boarded a bus in Virginia, and violating local Jim Crow laws, deliberately sat in the sections marked off for the other race. Twelve of the sixteen men were arrested; one, James Peck was brutally assaulted; and Rustin served thirty days on a North Carolina chain gang. One can only imagine the treatment of a homosexual black man in a southern prison of that era, but Rustin was undeterred. Their Journey was inspired by a defiant act by a courageous black woman, Irene Morgan, who in 1944, traveling on an interstate bus, refused to move to the back. Heroic as Rosa Parks undoubtedly was, she had what came to be the Montgomery Improvement Association and its leaders E.D. Nixon and Dr. King watching her back. Morgan had no connection to the movement and no allies when she was arrested. In the first instance I have found in the modern era of violent self-defense, she kicked the arresting officer in the testicles.

¹⁶⁰Mulford Q. Sibley, *The Quiet Battle: Writings on the Theory and Practice of Non-Violent Resistance* (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), 7.

She sought and got help from the NAACP. That gave her the fortitude to take her case (she lost in the state courts) all the way to the Supreme Court—where she won. The decision, handed down in 1946, outlawed Jim Crow on interstate buses. The Journey, then, was conceived as a way to test the implementation of that decision the following year. Jim Peck, who fourteen years later on the most famous of all the Freedom Rides, was badly beaten, was also beaten on this one. He confounded his assailant by looking at him mildly and asking in a gentle tone of voice “What’s the matter?” In the last years of the movement it became fashionable to denounce this kind of behavior as cowardly and unnatural. Unnatural it surely was. Not many people have the guts, the forbearance, and the dedication to put themselves in harm’s way, knowing they will be unable to protect themselves.

Thurgood Marshall was at this time the top lawyer at the NAACP, and he was strongly opposed to tactics like the Journey. Here is Rustin’s reaction to Marshall: “Unjust laws and social actions do not change because supreme courts deliver just decisions...At times freedom will demand that its followers go into situations where even death is to be faced...But if anyone at this date in history believes that the ‘white problem,’ which is one of privilege, can be settled without some violence, he is mistaken and fails to realize the ends to which men can be driven to hold on to what they deem their privileges... That is why Negroes and whites who participate in direct action must pledge themselves to nonviolence in word and deed. For in this way alone can the inevitable violence be reduced to a minimum.” Rustin was a brave man. In 1942, before Morgan had won her case, he had mounted his own one-man Freedom Ride on a bus between Louisville and Nashville, and seen the value of nonviolence as a technique. When police pulled him off the bus and started to beat and kick him, he did not resist. Some white passengers were

appalled and intervened to stop the brutality. He was hauled into court, and when he told his story to a young Assistant District Attorney he was let go with the words “You may go Mister Rustin.” He tells us in his account of the incident that he is “certain that he was addressed as ‘Mister’ (as no Negro [was] ever addressed in the South)...because I had without fear faced four policemen and said ‘there is no need to beat me. I offer you no resistance.’”¹⁶¹

Rustin, Farmer and Robinson, along with George Hauser, CORE’s other founder, were on to something transformative, but they lacked the funding and perhaps the organizational skills to build on their recognition that Gandhi’s *satyagraha* would come to be an unconquerable weapon in the fight for racial justice.

This is not to imply that CORE was ineffectual in the 1940s and 50s. Chapters in Washington D.C., St. Louis and several northern cities demonstrated repeatedly that small groups of activists participating in direct actions – sit ins, picketing, boycotts — could succeed in desegregating eating places, playgrounds and swimming pools. Their greatest weakness was the inability to gain anything beyond a tenuous foothold in the South, the citadel of Jim Crow.¹⁶²

What CORE did that was essential to the movement was set the template for everything that happened starting in Montgomery in 1955. Two quotes illustrate the organic connection and the essential difference between CORE and SCLC: “King’s philosophy was closely akin to, and

¹⁶¹Eds. Carbado and Weise, *Time on Two Crosses*, 8

¹⁶²They did have two small and not very active chapters in South Carolina but threats against them were so great that they changed their name to the Congress of Registration Education.

largely derived from that of the founders of CORE.”¹⁶³ But another historian points out that “clearly the intellectual linkage between the Gandhian, civil disobedient tradition of CORE and King’s nonviolence is there, but if read in the context of events there is also a departure from what had come before. King was the charismatic leader with a direct relationship to a community wide mass movement, which is something different from being a participant in a movement whose effort centers around its trained cadres.”¹⁶⁴ And of course Montgomery became the first mass movement for racial justice since the Union Army had disbanded.

Why Montgomery? Why 1955? These are questions worth asking – and answering. When the newly minted Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. received his PhD from Boston University he immediately received offers of a Professorship and a Deanship at two northern colleges. He and his wife Coretta considered them carefully but ultimately decided that their destiny lay in the South, and he agreed to become pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist church in Montgomery. One can write any number of counterfactual scenarios which imagine what might have happened if King had stayed in the North, but none of them end in the Civil Rights bill of 1964 and the Voting Rights bill of 1965. Those bills or some attenuated simulacrum of them would surely have passed eventually, but in hindsight I think few would disagree that it’s fortunate the country did not have to wait for that “eventually” to appear. As it is, even with

¹⁶³Meier, Rudwick and Broderick, *Black Protest Thought*, 291.

¹⁶⁴Shapiro, *White Violence*, 431.

those two life-altering pieces of legislation enacted, many American cities were reduced to an anarchic state by the urban riots of the late 1960s.¹⁶⁵

King was indisputably the avatar of the movement, but it took a perfect storm, a confluence of factors, to make Montgomery, often called the “cradle of the confederacy,” the historical starting point of the metamorphosis in race relations in the United States. When King arrived as the new pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist the matrix he found included exceptional and militant resident leaders like the sleeping car porters union representative E.D. Nixon, and the Professor of English at Alabama State College Jo Ann Robinson, who were already involved in trying to improve conditions for blacks on the local transit system. It also included an ignorantly obdurate bus company management that refused to address complaints of rudeness by their drivers towards black customers, and just as obdurately refused to adopt a system of seating that did not address segregation at all but merely sought to introduce an element of fairness in allocating seats during crowded rush hours. Politeness and fairness (again without impinging in any way on segregation) were problems that had been resolved to general satisfaction in nearby Mobile and other cities across the South. As a result the fifty thousand African Americans of Montgomery were seething, frustrated by their inability to change things, and although the possibility of boycott was discussed as early as 1954, they took no action.

165 By 1965 the line between urban anarchy and civil order was thin. In Selma, King continued a protest march in contravention of a temporary injunction by a federal court, but turned back after only a few hundred yards. This move created an irreparable breach between him and the student militants of SNCC who accused him of selling out by turning around. From the opposite perspective, Frank Johnson one of the few decent southern judges, wanted to know why King had defied his injunction even partially. “‘I did it to give them an outlet,’ King explained, saying that his supporters’ energies had to be channeled in a constructive direction. “‘I felt that if I had not done it, the pent up emotions, the inner tensions...would have exploded into retaliatory violence.” Quoted in Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 406.

Then Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to move. Because she was a person of strong character and widely admired in the community, Nixon immediately saw that she would be perfect as the centerpiece of a test case. He told Parks, “We can boycott the bus lines with this and at the same time go to the Supreme Court.” When she agreed, Nixon’s next call was to the new young preacher who seemed to have leadership qualities.

Without E.D. Nixon; without the organizing energy of Robinson, whose mastery of the mimeograph machine played a vital role in informing the community of mass meetings in support of a boycott; without an obtuse bus company management; without Ms. Parks; and without the oratorical genius of Dr. King, there would have been no “Montgomery” in 1955.

With the success of the early boycott meetings there was need for a formal organization to move forward, so the Montgomery Improvement Association was formed and King was chosen as its first leader. It’s sometimes forgotten that as a student and even after he first arrived in Montgomery, King’s attachment to nonviolence as a way of life was non-existent, and even his attitude towards non-violence as a tactic was imbued with ambiguity. He had read Gandhi in school, but remained skeptical.¹⁶⁶ Two months into the boycott, the FOR worker who had been sent to assist King administratively and organizationally reported back to FOR that King had accepted an armed bodyguard and had applied for a pistol permit — which was refused. Of the parsonage, Glenn Smiley wrote “the place is an arsenal.”¹⁶⁷ Rustin, also on loan to King from FOR had the same concerns, and introduced King to the work of two disciples of

¹⁶⁶ King never accepted pacifism at Crozer [Divinity School], and in fact wrote a paper attacking A.J. Muste's notion that the atomic bomb had transformed the essential moral questions of war and peace" Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 74.

Gandhi, Richard Gregg and the same Shridharani who had inspired James Farmer fourteen years earlier. Rustin and his FOR colleague spoke repeatedly to King about the power of and the need for nonviolence.¹⁶⁸ The readings and the lectures must have been congenial to King, because according to Rustin, “It was gradually, over several weeks that Dr. King continuously deepened his commitment to nonviolence and within [only] six weeks he had demanded that there be no armed guards and no effort at associating himself in any form with violence...”¹⁶⁹

The first test of his new faith came soon enough. On January 30 1956, Coretta Scott King was home with their new daughter while Martin Luther King Jr. was preaching at a mass meeting. At about 9:30 PM Coretta heard a loud thump at the front of the house. Conditioned to fear the worst she ran with the baby to the back of the house just as a bomb went off, doing substantial damage to their home but hurting no one. By the time Martin was told what had happened and rushed home, a large and very angry crowd of neighbors and supporters had surrounded the house. The mayor and police commissioner arrived to show their concern but they were not made to feel welcome. Coretta tells the story: “The situation outside the house

167 Glenn Smiley letter, quoted in Mary King, *Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Power of Nonviolent Action* (Paris: Unesco Publishing, 1999) 124.

168 The reporter and editor Howell Raines wrote that Rustin was “an old lion of the movement, and...the first of the Eastern civil rights professionals to discover the young black preacher in Montgomery.” Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977) 52.

169 Ibid, 55.

was dangerous. Though the crowd was singing, the people were angry and aroused...You could sense the heat of their anger. Many were armed; even the little boys had broken bottles. A policeman held back one black man who said, 'You got your thirty eight, I got mine. Let's shoot it out.' Tension was so high that if a white man had accidentally tripped over a Negro, it could have triggered the most awful riot in our history...At that point Martin walked out on the porch... In some ways it was the most important hour of his life. His own home had just been bombed, his wife and baby could have been killed, this was the first deep test of his Christian principles and his theories of nonviolence. Standing there, very grave and calm, he dominated those furious people. Martin said 'My wife and baby are all right. I want you to go home and put down your weapons. We cannot solve this problem through retaliatory violence. We must meet violence with nonviolence...We must love our white brothers no matter what they do to us...We must meet hate with love' ...After that the crowd began to thin out, and people went back to their homes. A white policeman's voice was heard in the crowd saying 'if it hadn't been for that nigger preacher, we'd all be dead.'"¹⁷⁰

After that, King never looked back. Every speech, every sermon thereafter, while filled with demands for justice was also suffused with demands that his listeners abandon hate and anger and learn to love their oppressors. And now he very often acknowledged his debt to Gandhi, although apparently the first person in Montgomery to link publically the boycott and Gandhi was a white librarian who wrote a letter to the *Montgomery Advertiser* referencing

¹⁷⁰Coretta Scott King, *My Life With Martin Luther King* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winton, 1969) 129-130.

Gandhi's salt march to the sea.¹⁷¹ Gandhi in a sense had taken over his life and *satyagraha* thereafter became for him a way of life. King wrote, "Gandhi was inevitable. If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving towards a world of peace and harmony. We ignore him at our own risk."¹⁷² A past Executive Director of the SCLC, Wyatt T. Walker, told me King "took the modern techniques of Gandhi and draped over them the theology of the New Testament that's exemplified in Jesus of Nazareth."¹⁷³ Ed King, a white native Mississippian who was chaplain at Tougaloo College in Jackson, told me, "When I realized that Dr. King and the people of Montgomery were combining the teachings of Jesus with the teachings of Henry David Thoreau with the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, I thought this time America is going to get through it; we won't have to have massive violence because the black community has produced a leader that any kind of moderate would follow."¹⁷⁴ Perhaps more typical was the woman who, Harris Wofford told me, shouted out at a church meeting, "You can call it Gandhi, but I call it Jesus!"¹⁷⁵

171 Warren, *Who Speaks*, 204.

172 Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Words of Martin Luther King Jr.*, (New York: New Market Press, 1983), 71.

173 Walker Interview, 2007.

174 Walker Interview, 2007.

175 Wofford interview, July 12th, 2007.

When I asked Wyatt Walker the difference between CORE (he had been state director of CORE in Virginia) and SCLC, he said there was no difference in philosophy, but “SCLC was rooted in the black church and CORE did not have that basic support in the church community.”¹⁷⁶

Of all those closest to King, only the Reverend James Lawson had studied Gandhi as deeply and been influenced as profoundly. Lawson is a Methodist pastor who studied at Oberlin and Boston University before attending Vanderbilt Divinity School. When he first met King in 1957 he was just back from three years in India, so he brought a special expertise to discussions of Gandhi. His devotion to the Christian ideal of love was total. He told John Lewis, one of the students who came to study *satyagraha* with him, “It was not enough... simply to endure a beating. It was not enough to resist the urge to strike back at an assailant. ‘That urge can’t be there,’ he would tell us. ‘You have to do more than just not hit back. You have to have no desire to hit back. You have to love that person who’s hitting you. You’re going to love him.’”¹⁷⁷

Lawson lived (and I am sure still does live) his beliefs. Several people told me how he reacted when a racist spit in his face as he walked a department store picket line. He looked his antagonist in the eye and politely asked him if he could borrow his handkerchief. The man was so surprised that he gave his handkerchief to Lawson who used it to wipe the spit off his face. The next minute the two were discussing motorcycles, apparently a common interest. King liked

¹⁷⁶Walker Interview, 2007.

¹⁷⁷Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 85.

to quote Lincoln: “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?” He and Lawson were powerful partners.

The phrase “way of life” had a cardinal significance in their lives and in the lives of some of those for whom they became role models. John Lewis describes the concept: “This is something Lawson stressed over and over again, that this is not simply a technique or a tactic or a strategy or a tool to be pulled out when it is needed. It is not something you turn on or off like faucet. This sense of love, this sense of peace, the capacity for compassion, is something you carry inside yourself every waking minute of the day.”¹⁷⁸ Of course Gandhi was important to the philosophically committed, but it is no coincidence that those who experienced his thought in an intensely personal way were first and foremost committed Christians. Farmer, Lawson, King, Andrew Young, Walker, Lafayette, Lewis, Fred Shuttlesworth, and so many others who believed as they did, were all either ordained ministers or had studied at theological seminaries. Who but a deeply religious man could have written “The Negro must love the white man because the white man needs his love to remove his tensions, insecurities and fears?”¹⁷⁹ This is a remarkable and admirable statement, but although tens of thousands of people followed Dr. King, they could not follow him this far.

Dr. Kenneth Clark, a noted black psychologist wrote, “The natural reactions to injustice, oppression and humiliation are bitterness and resentment...It would seem, then, that any

¹⁷⁸Ibid, 77-78.

¹⁷⁹King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, 105.

demand that the victims of oppression be required to love those who oppress them places an additional and probably intolerable psychological burden on those victims.”¹⁸⁰ Just after the catastrophic mayhem of the Freedom Rides, James Baldwin published his long essay “The Fire Next Time” in *The New Yorker*, a publication whose readership was overwhelmingly white, and explained to those who would listen: “Most Negroes cannot risk assuming that the humanity of white people is more real to them than their color...and when [the Negro] realizes that the treatment accorded him has nothing to do with anything he has done, that the attempt of white people to destroy him—for that is what it is—is utterly gratuitous, it is not hard for him to think of white people as devils.” Only the most deeply felt commitment was able to overcome these easily understood negative emotions. A small anecdote from my own experience: on July 4th weekend of 1963 the Methodist Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam organized and led a group to travel to and sit in at an amusement park outside Baltimore that was closed to African Americans. We were all arrested and thrown into a large cell. I have no idea why our jailers did this but they threw a racist drunk into the tank with us who was ranting about the niggers and the nigger lovers. A whole integrated group surrounded him, and were saying “We love you. You’re our brother. Why do you hate us?” They engaged him for about an hour, and at the end of the hour he broke down and cried and said “My God, I’ve been wrong all my life.” If a screenwriter had limned the scene it couldn’t have been a more perfect – and more unlikely – example of the power of love. That little incident does nothing to contradict what Clark and Baldwin wrote, but it does support some of the things King and Lawson were saying.

¹⁸⁰Quoted in Warren, *Who Speaks*, 23.

Loving a devil is not intuitive, particularly if the devil is beating you. The vast moral and pastoral authority of the philosopher kings of the movement helped keep violence in check once apathy, while still a factor, was no longer ubiquitous. People in black communities who were enjoined to love their enemies recognized the concept—for many of them the gospels were a vivid living document, and so even if they could not quite believe, they responded to what was asked of them. Even those who were unchurched often were willing to cooperate. At the beginning of the Montgomery boycott King and his associates went to the pool halls and night clubs to spread the word to people who were unlikely to hear it in a place of worship – and the group they reached there stayed off the buses. George Lakey, a white author and Swarthmore professor, who was a summer volunteer in 1964, told me that after the children were killed in the Birmingham bombing, SCLC once again fanned out to the pool halls and dance halls to try to tamp down plans for revenge. We know that they were not entirely successful because there was a serious multi-day riot in Birmingham, but perhaps it might have been worse without those visits. Lakey also told me what he considered to be the essence of what was taught to him and other new movement recruits: “There was an understanding that your behavior in your role in the movement is one thing. When you are on that march you have to be absolutely nonviolent even if you die. And your behavior after the march is done, back home, is something else. That is, we’re not trying to legislate a way of life, here.” Julian Bond, now Chairman of the NAACP, and a former SNCC official told me, “When I was engaging in movement activity on the picket line, or march, or knocking on people’s doors I would behave nonviolently. But when I was off duty and some occasion arose where a violent response would

be called for and I'm talking about protective violence as opposed to aggressive violence, then I would certainly take care of myself." Bond called this "situational nonviolence."¹⁸¹

CORE and SCLC were founded by parsons. SNCC was founded by college students who had started the lunch counter sit-ins that spread incredibly rapidly across the South in 1960. Although SCLC funded the conference where their group was founded, the students' attachment to religion was much more tenuous than was their elders'. They decided to form their own organization and refused requests to affiliate with CORE and the SCLC.¹⁸² Like their sister organizations nonviolence was part of their credo—and was even embedded in their name.

Among the people elected as leaders of SNCC were Marion Barry, later mayor of Washington, D.C., Congressman John Lewis, and well known activists Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, but arguably the most important figure in SNCC was a young man who never sought a leadership role but in spite of his genuine modesty became a spiritual and intellectual guide to most of the COFO workers in Mississippi – Robert Moses. A graduate of Hamilton College with a

¹⁸¹Interview with author, November 16th, 2008.

¹⁸²Crucial to this decision was the influence of Ella Baker who initially convened the first student meeting at her alma mater Shaw University. She had worked for the NAACP and Dr. King, but felt strongly that the young people should remain independent of their elders. Everyone who knew her has written admiringly of her intellect and moral compass. Soon after SNCC was founded James Forman, a Chicago school teacher, became its professional staff director. Forman had always believed in African Americans using violence for self-defense. While he spent much of his time in the Atlanta home office, "he faced down lynch mobs from Monroe, North Carolina to McComb, Mississippi and many places in between." Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 208.

Master's degree in philosophy from Harvard, Moses was brave, brilliant and seemed to gain influence the more he sought to avoid gaining it.¹⁸³ Cleveland Sellers, who was for a time the leader of SNCC, wrote, "There was something about him, the manner in which he carried himself, that seemed to draw all of us to him."¹⁸⁴ It was Moses who orchestrated the Freedom Summer of 1964 and led the MFDP delegation to the Democratic convention in Atlantic City. Moses too was committed to nonviolence but his commitment had a different basis from the parsons and their followers. His approach was tactical, and George Lakey told me he was a brilliant strategist. By stressing nonviolence he was able to receive the grudging help of the racist, middle class White Citizens Councils who observed that all forms of economic activity, including outside investment, were greatly diminished in areas where violence was endemic. By using his enormous prestige to suppress black on white violence "what Bob Moses was representing was an actual political sophistication. Looking at the social structure, asking what the vulnerabilities are on the opponent's side of the whites. How can we reach to those vulnerabilities in such a way as to advantage us, to protect us, to advance us our struggle, and then use those vulnerabilities, which have to do with economic, pragmatic concerns and so on and so on? And do our actions empower the White Citizens' Council people, to force their agenda of social control over the Ku Klux Klan, and that's what keeps us alive. Now that is

183 Moses earned his Harvard doctorate after the movement collapsed.

184 Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), 83.

strategizing! Bob [Moses] told me, 'We count on the racists in the White Citizens' Council to keep us alive... through informal mechanisms of social control.'¹⁸⁵

In the course of a forty eight minute interview with me, Moses' focus was always on the strategy of getting the job done, and the job was "the getting of the target population to demand their rights. That was an organizing effort to really get to know them, getting their trust, convincing them that what you were talking about with them was something they should invest in at great sacrifice." CORE worker Matt Suarez outlined, in another interview, some of the obstacles that he and Moses faced: "A lot of time was spent just trying to convince the locals of the righteousness of your cause. People were intimidated, people were frightened, they had been frightened all their lives. They didn't want to associate themselves with you. They had been warned about outside agitators. And they were warned of reprisals."¹⁸⁶ That Suarez, Moses and the COFO team were able to get past these obstacles is a great tribute to their empathy, their patience and their power of persuasion.

I asked Moses if nonviolence was a philosophical, intellectual or emotional given for him personally. He virtually shrugged off the question of his own feelings saying: "For me it was a given, but on the other side it was a technique, a strategy for attacking the system...I never was drawn to the idea of promoting it for others." And there is one of the great divides between Moses' SNCC and King's SCLC. King's objective went beyond racial justice – he wanted to create

¹⁸⁵Interview with author, January 14th, 2007.

¹⁸⁶Interview with author, May 6th, 2008.

a beloved community. Moses was happy when his organizing efforts paid off, and people were demanding their rights. He told me the Nashville group, which included John Lewis, did “make an effort to infuse a philosophy into SNCC about nonviolence,” but went on to tell me, in terms of beatings and jailing it didn’t matter to white people what your philosophy was. His focus was always on a strategy that worked, and he made clear that he felt that black power and black nationalism “really energized a whole thrust in the black middle class...but never gained a foothold with the sharecroppers, the people, the rural poor, the urban poor...there was no translation of the ideas.” Aggressive violence, he told me, was “about setting yourself up to get gunned down.”¹⁸⁷ That left nonviolence as the only workable strategy. Jimmy Travis, a SNCC field worker who was close to Moses and was shot six times by Klansmen and miraculously survived, explained: “It was supposed to be a nonviolent struggle and anyway we didn’t have the capacity to manufacture ammunition. I couldn’t see going up against the army with bricks.”¹⁸⁸

We know that Moses’ and King’s personal commitment to nonviolence was shared by a small minority of the people who worked with them in the South. For most of that group nonviolence was just something that worked, that most of the time didn’t get you killed, and that didn’t alienate potential allies, something you had to commit yourself to if you wanted to be a part of something larger than yourself. This was a realization that came only because of the

¹⁸⁷Interview with author, October 29th, 2007.

¹⁸⁸Interview with author, October 24th, 2007.

proselytizing, the recruitment that took place in church mass meetings, in small training classes, and in farm to farm or door to door canvassing by the brave movement leaders and activists. Mary King, a SNCC worker who has written several books on nonviolence in the South and around the world, explained, “An absolutely critical factor in the development of the cohesion required for a nonviolent movement is the transmission of knowledge, the spread of an understanding of how the alternative technique of nonviolent struggle works. Withholding of retaliation is not intuitive. What is intuitive is to retaliate, and so for an entire people or an entire society to learn to withhold retaliation is an immense job.”¹⁸⁹ It was the combined impact of what I identified as the second and third strands in my hypothesis, i.e., a philosophical embrace of nonviolence and a recognition that nonviolence was the only practical way forward, that got the immense job done. That impact was what overcame the apathy that had smothered so many people’s yearning for a better life; it was what allowed them not to forget, but to move beyond a deadening past into a changed America that held out the promise of a time when people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

189 Interview with author March 27th, 2008.

Chapter 6: The Movement Died When Nonviolence Died

Starting in 1966, there was a sea change in the rhetoric of some of the leading actors in the movement, a change which signaled the imminent demise of the ethic of nonviolence which had been at the very beginning in 1942 that movement's fundamental premise. By 1968 this premise had been almost completely nullified, buried under an avalanche of increasingly violent screeds by leaders like Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Julius Lester, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. The murder of Martin Luther King silenced his plangent voice, which had never wavered in expressing his belief that love would always be more powerful than violence, and SCLC never recovered from his loss. Frightened white liberals backed away from the cause and in some cases were involuntarily severed from it by the impulse to separatism, which more often than not seemed to go hand in hand with calls for "revolutionary" violence. George Wiley of CORE and John Lewis of SNCC, who remained faithful to the founding vision of a "Beloved Community," were replaced by more radical leaders and derided as having lost touch with the black masses. Neither of these organizations, regardless of the degree of militancy of their leaders, ever attracted a substantial following among the underemployed and exploited black masses. The new National Director of CORE, Floyd McKissick, stated that "nonviolence was a dying philosophy [that had] outlived its usefulness"¹⁹⁰ This was a message that for a variety of reasons did not resonate even in the most neglected and abused corners of the American South. By 1968 McKissick was gone and CORE fell into the hands of Roy Innis who turned it into

¹⁹⁰August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement 1942-1968* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 414.

his personal fiefdom. The downward trajectory of SNCC followed a slightly different arc. In 1966 at a national meeting of SNCC it was decided to expel all whites, and the magnificent Fanny Lou Hamer was told that she was “no longer relevant” and “not at the level of development” of the now forgotten arrogant racial tigers who denounced her.¹⁹¹ Not long after that, SNCC entered into an ill-fated alliance with the Black Panthers, but by 1969 it had held its last meeting. The movement as we knew it in the 1950s and 1960s was dead, but right to the bitter end—and the end was bitter—it produced no violence in spite of the new rhetoric.

Even Malcolm X, who delighted in frightening liberals of every color, was not totally consistent in his embrace of violence. In 1964 he made a point of seeking out Martin Luther King to be photographed shaking his hand in the Senate gallery as Johnson’s Civil Rights bill was being debated. He told reporters he was urging the Senate to pass the bill, exactly as it was with no changes. A few months later he flew to Selma while King was in jail. SCLC stalwarts Andrew Young and James Bevel were deeply concerned that he would say something that might cause bloodshed, but Malcolm surprised them. He told Coretta King that he had come to help, not to stir things up. “He wanted to present an alternative...it might be easier for whites to accept Martin’s proposals after hearing him.”¹⁹² On the other hand, very nearly at the same time, he

191 Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fanny Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 138.

192 Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 372-373.

made a speech to the Trotskyite Militant Labor Forum in which he said: “I say we need a Mau-Mau and I’ll be the first to join it.”¹⁹³

Stokely Carmichael was an exceptionally intelligent and charismatic young man. For a time he was Chairman of SNCC, and he is usually credited with creating the “Black Power” slogan although W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright had both earlier used it in their work. In another era, with so much going for him, he might have been a Senator or the leader of a large corporation (although he attributed many of the world’s woes to large corporations). In the event, overwhelmed and embittered by the brutality and oppression he experienced and saw all around him as a notably brave SNCC worker, he chose exile. In Guinea he became a significant person in the entourage of that country’s leader, Sekou Touré, but died young of cancer after coming home. By the end of his life he had come to believe that the chief enemy of mankind was not racism, but the capitalist matrix that produced racism. On the last page of his powerful autobiography he asks: “Why ...is the United States not the great and humane country it so easily could and ought to be?”¹⁹⁴ This is not a question asked by a hater, but rather one posed by a heartbroken lover.

George Lakey told me of ethnographic research that showed that when blacks made threats they were much less likely than whites to follow up with violent acts. He illustrated with

193 Malcolm X, *Two Speeches by Malcolm X* (New York: Pathfinder, 2004), 37.

194 Stokely Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael* (New York: Scribner, 2005), 848.

an anecdote from James Farmer. One of Farmer's young staffers at CORE spent all his lunch hours listening to Malcolm X on Harlem street corners, so Farmer became concerned. "So he calls this young guy aside and says 'I'd like to know a little bit more about what's going on here, about your attraction to Malcolm X.' And the young guy says. 'Oh, gee. You've got to understand. Active nonviolence is such hard work that it's a relief to listen to inactive violence.'"¹⁹⁵ Notwithstanding his talk of "by all means necessary" and the Mau Mau, obviously not everybody was frightened by Malcolm's rhetoric.

In his own book Carmichael tells us what he believed, writing in the street patois that this very well educated young man sometimes affected: "Can we talk about nonviolence? What's to talk about? That ain't negotiable. We nonviolent period...SNCC will not buy, store or distribute weapons. SNCC workers will not carry guns."¹⁹⁶ If the local people who sheltered them were armed for self-defense that was a different matter, he would certainly not try to dissuade them. As for black power, here is how he defines it, this time in his own voice: "our problems had nothing to do with our 'acceptance' by white America and less with 'universal brotherhood.' Our struggle had to be about power. And since SNCC was neither crazy nor stupid, it had to be clear that we weren't talking about overthrowing the system and black folks taking over the country—so why all the weeping and gnashing of liberal teeth? This was simply about the power to affirm our black humanity, to defend the dignity, integrity and institutions of

¹⁹⁵Lakey interview, 2007.

¹⁹⁶Carmichael, *Ready For Revolution*, 303.

our culture; and to collectively organize the political and economic power to begin to control and develop our communities.”¹⁹⁷ Reading that paragraph it is a little hard to understand why such a broad spectrum of people—from Hubert Humphrey to William Buckley—made him out to be a frightening extremist. One of his heroes as a student at Howard was an older activist who had already been branded as an extremist, Robert Williams.

Williams was a well educated black veteran who experienced the usual indignities endured by servicemen of color during World War II. When he returned to his home town of Monroe, North Carolina, he became the militant leader of the moribund NAACP chapter there. Professor Timothy Tyson describes him this way: “Handsome and rugged, at twenty-one he could build cars, hand tool machine parts, handle a .50-caliber machine gun, and write a sonnet...Robert Williams did not come home to pick cotton.”¹⁹⁸ He immediately saw the need for a strong, armed group of men to defend the community against depredations by the Klan, and when the Klan tried to enter the black part of town they were met with a fusillade. But Williams was no apostle of violence. In fact, against all odds he continued his love/hate relationship with the United States for his entire life—with love generally in the ascendant. Williams was forced into exile for a number of years by a false charge of kidnapping a white couple. At a particularly tense time these purported victims, the Stegells, lost their way and wandered into the heart of the black community only one day after they had been seen in

197 Ibid, 849

198 Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams & the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 148.

town, their car draped with the edifying banner “OPEN SEASON ON COONS.” Many people wanted to lynch them on the spot, but Williams interceded to save their lives. In spite of this, Williams was accused of kidnapping them. Mabel Stegell, who drove peacefully home after Williams told his people to leave them alone, said later: “At the time, I was not even thinking about being kidnapped. The papers, the publicity and all that stuff is what brought in that kidnapping mess.”¹⁹⁹

The Deacons for Self Defense was an organization born of rage and frustration at Klan violence. Formed in 1964, It brought together groups of armed black men in many communities who formed their own chapters. Its leaders in many venues across the South were grass roots activists—barbers, laborers, mill hands, unemployed. Most Deacons chapters were clandestine, with names of members closely guarded. Their principle purpose was to protect activists from white violence by providing individual protection to particularly targeted blacks, and as often, to be a watchful presence on the edge of mass protests to protect peaceful demonstrators. Occasionally they made forays into their own local African American communities to “educate” recalcitrant “toms” who continued to patronize white stores in defiance of a boycott.

They were tremendously effective for a time, and believers in strictly nonviolent tactics were always glad to become aware of their presence. The author of the definitive history of the Deacons flatly asserts that “only after the Deacons appeared were the civil rights laws

¹⁹⁹Ibid, 281.

effectively enforced and the obstructions of terrorists and compliant local law enforcement agencies neutralized.”²⁰⁰

It’s a fact that many times men and women who had taken up the cause committed to nonviolence became so embittered that they altered their stance and were outspokenly willing to contemplate revenge. However, violent revenge never happened.

Violence did happen around the periphery of the movement. At a mass rally in Montgomery, at the beginning of the Selma marches, in Albany, Georgia, in Memphis in the garbage men’s strike — and elsewhere, there was violence from people who had never been trained, never committed to nonviolence and had “joined” a protest without being asked. These incidents were few and in no way organically connected to the movement. They were an embarrassment, and that was their only significance.

There was a certain sadness in the effective disappearance of CORE, SCLC and SNCC, but in an important sense they were no longer needed. Deep friendships had been formed within them, and their members had an attachment to them that was made up in large part of pride in how they had behaved as individuals and in how successful they had been in achieving their objective. But the important thing is that Jim Crow was dead and they had killed it nonviolently.

200 Lance Hill, *Deacons for Defense* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2004), 259.

Coda

For to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill—Sun Tzu

Seventeen years ago Derrick Bell wrote unequivocally: “Black people will never gain full equality in this country...African Americans must confront and conquer the otherwise deadening reality of our permanent subordinate status.”²⁰¹ John Lewis certainly has a different perspective. The Congressman told me he believed that Cheney, Schwerner and Goodman “should be honored as the founding fathers of a new America.”²⁰²

To buttress his pessimism Bell quotes Albert Camus’ magnificent essay “The Myth of Sisyphus” and implies that although the struggle against racism, like Sisyphus’ task, is hopeless, black people can find meaning and joy in the struggle itself. Of course I agree that the struggle itself has meaning. Robert Penn Warren wrote “the work in voter registration involves, most importantly the development of the will to stand up and act”²⁰³ But the will to act led to the vote which led to a very different political landscape in the South – and elsewhere. So I take a different lesson from Camus. I believe his concerns were metaphysical – the inevitability of death, the indifference of the universe to human concerns – true understanding of these are

201 Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 12.

202 Interview with author, July 11th, 2007.

203 Warren, *Who Speaks*, 20

the summits which can never be attained, and about which he wrote “*La lutte elle-même suffit à remplir un coeur d’homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.*”²⁰⁴ But Camus risked his life repeatedly as a member of the French underground fighting the Nazis – and this was a fight that he and his comrades won – just as black people won the right to vote and to live free of Jim Crow.

Camus also wrote that people were meant to be neither victims nor executioners (*ni victimes ni bourreaux*). He was writing of the Vichyites, the collaborators, the men he called “the bureaucrats of hatred and torture.” He counseled those who after the war sought vengeance, not to give in to hatred or make any concessions to violence or allow “passions to become blind; the most difficult battle to be won against the enemy must be fought within ourselves, with an exceptional effort that will transform our appetite for hatred into a desire for justice.”²⁰⁵ This advice was Camus’ gift to those Mississippi activists who were too far from Dr. King geographically and politically to listen to him.

We know that Camus was important to Bob Moses, and movement worker Jim Kates told me that Stokely Carmichael was carrying around a battered copy of Camus’ essays from “Combat” when they first met and that thereafter Kates was seldom without his own copy in

204 ‘The struggle itself is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine that Sisyphus is happy’.

205 “Defense of Intelligence.” Speech by Albert Camus, March 15, 1945, in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 63.

rural Mississippi. He says that it was Camus who turned him from a tactical practitioner of nonviolence into a true believer.²⁰⁶

Of course “The Myth” doesn’t say explicitly that Sisyphus didn’t add muscle from all his repetitions and thereby found it progressively easier to roll the rock up hill; it doesn’t say explicitly that he never got any closer to the top after the first effort – but the import is clear. Nothing ever changed.²⁰⁷

Yes – if our battle is against our mortality then the outcome can never change and the struggle will be our only reward. But those young people in Alabama and Georgia and Mississippi, with Camus or Gandhi or the New Testament rolled up in their hip pockets, changed things. Racism is still deep and painful in America, but is it as deep and painful as it was? Shortly after the 2008 presidential election Bell wrote: “It remains to be seen whether the old resistances to change, whether racial or economic, can be diluted by an Obama whose leadership of the nation must prove as effective as that of the campaign.”²⁰⁸ So it would appear that in Bell’s opinion the best we can hope for is a “dilution” of racism. I reject that view. It transforms the election into a nugatory event, and diminishes the importance of the movement

²⁰⁶Kates Interview, 2007.

²⁰⁷Ed. Howatson, M.C., *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 525.

²⁰⁸Derrick Bell, “Opinion Viewpoint,” *Eugene Weekly*, January 21, 2009, 4. It’s worth noting that Barack Obama was his student at Harvard Law School.

in which he himself played an important part. We have come a long way, and the main engine of our progress has been the nonviolent strategy I have written about here. In a 1963 essay titled “What Does Nonviolence Mean?” LeRoi Jones wrote disparagingly of that strategy and implied that Dr. King, by promulgating it, had become a pawn of an unholy coalition between whites and the black middle class—a combination formed expressly to block any meaningful — meaning radical — change in the condition of ordinary blacks. It is interesting that when he challenged himself to furnish an alternative to what he saw as weak and ineffectual efforts of passive resistance, his prescription was just more of the same — writ large. After the Birmingham bombing that killed the little girls, he writes, “Black workers should have walked out of every job they hold in the city. A general strike should have been called. An attempt should have been made to shut down completely the city’s industrial resources. The city should have died, should have been killed by Negroes.”²⁰⁹ Would this huge escalation in a boycott, what was essentially a tactic used repeatedly by civil rights groups, have made the civil rights bill which passed nine months later any stronger? Would it have helped to improve the living conditions of Birmingham’s black and white poor? I think not. Was our way really so ineffectual?²¹⁰ Mr. Jones (now Mr. Baraka) is a powerful writer, but he doesn’t convince me. From my admittedly ameliorist perspective, perhaps distorted by the fact that I am both white *and* middle class, I

209 LeRoi Jones, *Home, Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow & Co., Inc., 1966), 146.

210 Bayard Rustin who had suffered more for justice, seen more of the struggle, and been around longer than anyone other than A. Phillip Randolph, noted in 1965 that the “legal foundations of racism were destroyed.” That was no small accomplishment. Quoted in Meier, Rudwick and Broderick, *Black Protest*, 444-445.

believe that the last forty five years have proved him wrong. I see no reason to believe that our progress will stop. I refuse to believe that African Americans will always be compelled to confront their *permanent* subordinate status. Professor Bell and I, when we went South, didn't just dilute things. We helped to change things.

In his Nobel acceptance speech, William Faulkner spoke of "a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance." My study of the civil rights movement has led me to believe -- with him -- that "man will not merely endure: he will prevail."

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